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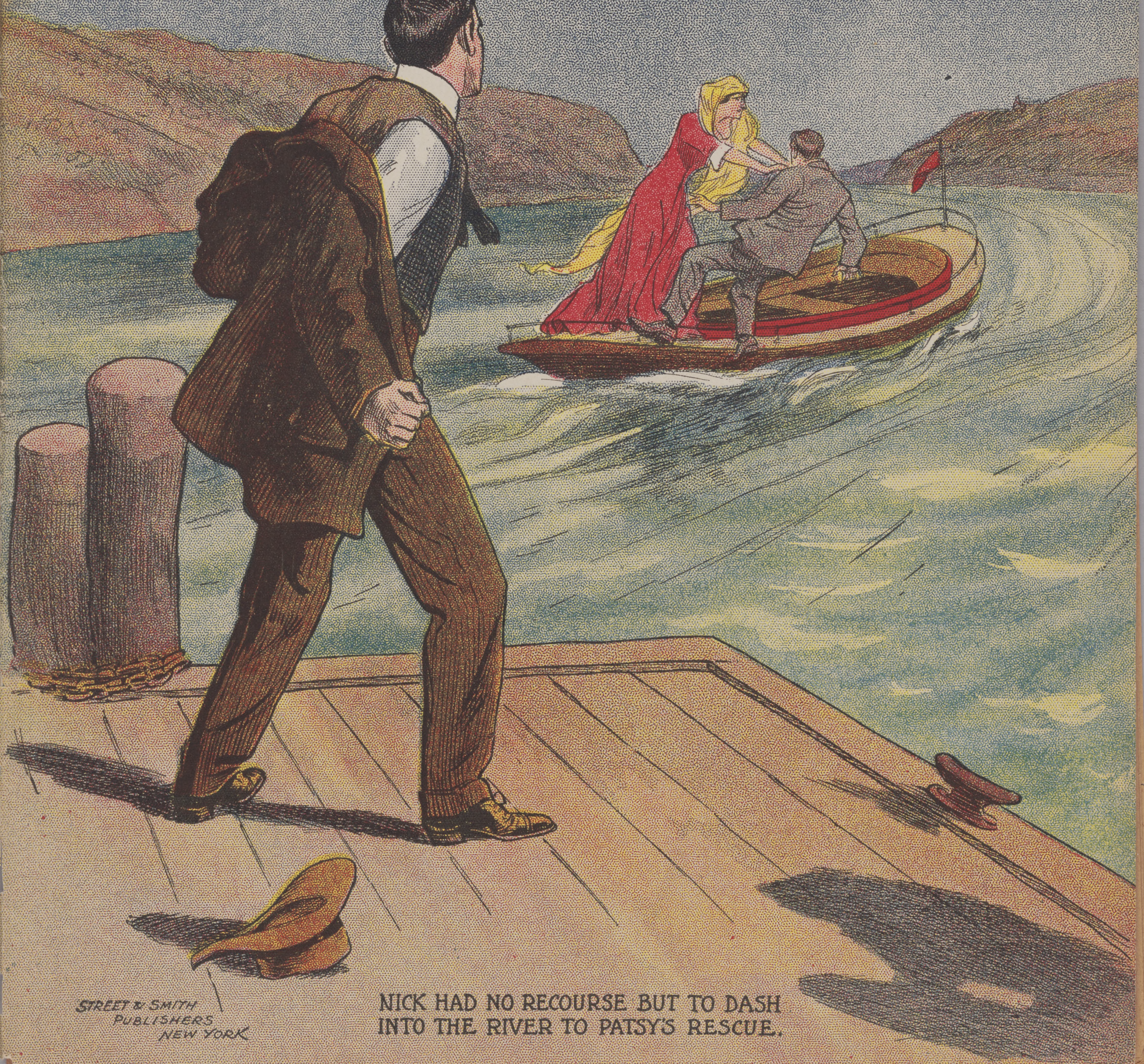
# NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

## THE CLIFF CASTLE AFFAIR



NICK HAD NO RECOURSE BUT TO DASH
INTO THE RIVER TO PATSY'S RESCUE.

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REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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# THE CLIFF CASTLE MYSTERY;*

## Or, NICK CARTER'S QUICKEST CHANGE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

### CHAPTER I.

### NICK CARTER OUTWITTED.

Nick Carter, the famous criminal investigator, was in the act of leaving the Potter Building, in New York, when, giving a little start, he halted suddenly halfway down the steps that led to the street.

A disquieting thought had flashed into his mind, and it was plain to him that he needed a few moments for reflection before he proceeded farther.

The detective had been engaged for several days on one of the most mystifying cases that ever had come to his attention. His client had been a young woman named Clarita Downing, who had besought his aid in her efforts to regain a fortune that had been left to her by her father, who had died four and a half years before. To Nick Carter Miss Downing explained that there were two women who so closely resembled her that persons were unable to tell one from another. One of these was her cousin, Isabel Danton, and the other was a young woman whose name she never had known.

According to the story told by the young woman to the detective, her troubles began at a hotel in Saratoga. There she found that her trunks had been removed by a woman who, paying her bill, had represented herself as Clarita Downing. This unknown then proceeded to the Downing home, Cliff Castle, on the Hudson, and there caused the servants to believe her to be their mistress. Even the oldest of them—a man named Philip—was deceived, and Clarita was turned away as an impostor. Her efforts to establish her identity caused her to be sent to an insane asylum in Canada. This institution was in charge of Doctor Spleen.

While in Canada, Clarita received a note which was written by Philip on his deathbed. In this the old man expressed his regret that he had been led into error, and he informed the unfortunate young woman that in a certain package, marked "17—A," might be found proof of the fact that she was, indeed, the person she represented herself to be. The young woman was unable to tell where this package was to be found.

Impressed by the young woman's story, Nick Carter had taken her to his house and placed her in the care of his wife, fearing that otherwise she might be found by her enemies and returned to the Canadian asylum from which she had escaped.

In the course of his investigations, the famous detective learned that the woman who, it was alleged, had usurped Clarita's place, had become the wife of Doctor Burton, a physician who had been responsible for the sending of Clarita to Canada. Another important figure in the case was James Greenleaf, a lawyer.

Nick Carter was still in the dark concerning many features of the case, when, upon returning to his home late one night, he found his servant Peter gagged and bound. A few moments later he discovered that his wife and Clarita had been kidnaped. From the policeman on the beat he learned that three men and a woman had been seen in a carriage in front of his door. A little more specific information was obtained from Patsy, a street gamin, who happened to be near at the time.

Accompanied by Chick Carter, his assistant, and little Patsy, Nick followed a clew that led him to the office of Greenleaf, the lawyer. Here Burton and Doctor Spleen also were found. The three men were confounded by the appearance of Nick, who promised them immunity from arrest and surveillance for twenty-four hours if they would reveal the whereabouts of his wife and Clarita, and prove to him that they had suffered no injury. He was informed that his wife had been returned to her house.

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*Reprinted by Request.

While the detective was questioning the three men concerning Miss Downing, the door of an adjoining room was opened and there appeared on the threshold a young woman, in whom Nick recognized his client. The young woman then said that she and the three men were friends of Doctor Quartz, the most remarkable criminal with whom Nick Carter ever had to do. Doctor Quartz had committed suicide after being cornered by the detective, and his friends were determined to punish the man who had run him down.

The young woman further explained that the story of the loss of her fortune, her detention in the institution in Canada, and her fear of enemies was only part of a plot that would enable her to get into Nick Carter's house for the purpose of kidnaping his wife. Subsequently she and her confederates had become alarmed by the manner in which the detective was accumulating evidence against them, and had returned Mrs. Carter to her home, with the hope that her release would cause his activity against them to cease.

Upon hearing this statement, Nick Carter called up his house on the telephone, and was told that his wife had indeed returned. Accordingly he assured the conspirators that he would keep his word to them, and would neither arrest them nor keep them under surveillance for the next twenty-four hours. After this, he left them.

Now, leaving the Potter Building, in which Greenleaf's office was located, Nick suddenly reflected that, influenced by his emotions, he had acted inadvisedly. Into his mind had come a doubt as to whether the woman he had seen in Greenleaf's office was indeed Clarita Downing. Was it not possible that she was the woman who had usurped Clarita's place so successfully?

This doubt suggested another, and once more he hurried to a telephone and called up his home.

In a few moments, Nick had Peter, his servant, on the wire.

"Peter," he said, "I want to speak with Mrs. Carter."

There was a pause, then the voice of Peter asked weakly:

"With Mrs. Carter, sir?"

"Yes. You told me, about five minutes ago, that she had returned, did you not?"

Again there was a period of hesitation.

"Why, no, sir," came the answer.

The heart of the detective began to beat wildly.

"Were you not speaking to me about five minutes ago?" he demanded.

"No, sir."

"Were you within hearing of the telephone at that time?"

"Yes, sir. For the last half hour I have been working in the hall."

"You have admitted no strangers to the house this morning?"

"None, sir."

"You have had no information concerning Mrs. Carter since I left home?"

"None whatever, sir."

"Nor any news of Miss Downing?"

"Not a word, sir."

"That's all, Peter," the detective said gloomily, as he hung up the receiver.

That he had been duped there could be no doubt. His wife and Clarita Downing still were at the mercy of the conspirators. The voice he had heard over the telephone, when he had first called up his house, unquestionably was that of a confederate who had been switched onto the wire while the operator at the central exchange was trying to get the Carter residence.

Chick and the boy Patsy had started away in opposite directions, but as the detective looked around him searchingly, he saw Patsy loitering at a corner. He called the lad to him.

"Well, my boy, I have made a big mistake in letting those people off," he said. "I've got to get on their trail again with as little delay as possible. I am inclined to think you may be of service to me."

"Regular job?" queried the lad eagerly.

Nick Carter smiled gravely.

"You may work for me just as long as you care to stay," he said.

"Where now, sir?" asked the boy.

"I want you to go to the Grand Central Station, and remain in the waiting room."

"I'm off, you bet."

"Wait! What are you going there for?"

"To watch for them fellers."

"Right! They will be disguised, Patsy."

"If I see 'em, I'll know 'em."

"I hope so."

Nick himself hurried to the station of the West Shore Railroad, as being the most likely place for the men to seek, in case, as he suspected, their destination was Cliff Castle.

He told Patsy, before starting, that in case he got track of the men at the Grand Central, he was to hurry to the West Shore Station at once.

The detective arrived at the West Shore Station two hours after leaving the office of James Greenleaf.

He had adopted a disguise in which he had no fear of being detected, that of a man-of-war's man out for a holiday, and just about half-seas over. With him he carried concealed the paraphernalia for other and equally effective disguises.

He had not been waiting at the depot more than an hour and a half, when he started and smiled with satisfaction.

Approaching him were two persons whom he instantly recognized, although they were very thoroughly gotten up to represent two countrified "old folks," who had been on a pleasure trip to New York.

The woman, he acknowledged to himself, he would not have known; but he "tumbled" to the man at once, and, therefore, knew his companion as well.

The man was Burton, and the woman was the unknown.

"Good!" thought Nick. "They are on their way to Cliff Castle. Spleen and Greenleaf probably have gone the other way, and Patsy may recognize them. If he does not, no matter."

He purposely put himself in the way of the aged couple as they approached.

"Ahoy, there, messmate!" he said huskily. "Can you steer me to the craft wot's weighin' anchor fur West P'int?"

"Do you mean the railroad train?"

"Aye—aye, my hearty."

"You take the same train that we do. Follow us and you will be all right."

"Thankee kindly, messmate."

Burton and his companion passed on, and Nick followed.

They were soon in the train. The detective took a seat directly in front of that occupied by Burton and his companion.

He thought they might let drop a few words which would be interesting to him, and he was not mistaken.

## CHAPTER II.

### A DESPERATE GAME.

For a long time they did not speak, but when more than half the ride was gone over, he heard Burton say:

"We had a close call, my dear."

"Sh-h-h!" she replied.

"Bosh! We're out of it now."

"Well, wait until we get to the castle before you talk."

Another half hour passed. The man-of-war's man, apparently, was sound asleep and snoring.

"What's the first move now?" asked Burton, in a low tone of his companion.

"Don't you know?"

"Well, yes, I do."

"Then why ask?"

"It seems a pity to put an end to two such beautiful creatures as those——"

"Hush!"

"Well, they are beautiful. Not so beautiful as you are, my Queen of Hades."

"They must die."

"Ah, well; I suppose so!"

"And so must the others."

"Eh?"

"Greenleaf and Spleen."

"With all my heart."

"To-night?"

"Certainly."

"There never could be a better time."

"Why not?"

"There will be a warrant out for them; they will disappear. It will be thought that they have left the country to avoid arrest."

"You're a charmer, Zel."

Nick started.

"Zel!" he thought. "Ah, yes! I never saw her face but once, and that was in the flash of a bull's-eye lantern. No wonder that I did not know it at once. Now I can account for the something in Clarita's face that seemed familiar, and which I could not place. Zel, eh? All right, Zel, we will meet again."

"You're not going to do the whole thing to-night, are you?" continued Burton, after another pause.

"Why not?" asked Zel.

"Four cases of apoplexy in one night will be a good many."

"Bah! These will not be apoplectic, but——"

"I see. What will you do with the——"

"Hush! I will take care of that."

Suddenly Burton leaned forward and shook Nick roughly, but he had to continue it for some time before he succeeded in waking him.

At last, however, he leaped to his feet, and shouted:

"Eight bells! All han's—hello! what craft is this, anyhow?"

"You get out at the second station," said Burton. "I thought I'd wake you."

"Thankee kindly, messmate," and Nick arose and went into the smoking car.

There he found a place in which to make a marvelous change in his disguise.

He knew that Burton and Zel would leave the train at the next station, and he knew that he must leave with them.

He had heard enough to know that it was the woman's horrible purpose to murder his wife Ethel and Clarita that night, and that he must act quickly, if he succeeded in saving them from a horrible fate.

Nick Carter left the train on the side opposite to that on which Doctor Burton and his companion got off.

The night had become pitch dark, and a few leaps took the detective well out of view of everybody about the station, while, on the other hand, he could plainly see all that took place within the circle of light around the depot.

Standing thus, and at the same time working rapidly, all semblance of the man-of-war's man quickly disappeared, and in his place stood a stout, sturdy-looking Irishman in the clothes of a workingman.

He quickly tied his naval attire in a red bandana handkerchief, and cut a stout stick from the bushes near where he stood.

Thrusting one end of the improvised shillelah through the knot, he swung it over his shoulder.

The aged couple whom he had followed started away together just as Nick completed the change, and he instantly pursued them, having drawn a pair of rubber sandals over the soles of his shoes, so that he would make no noise on the road.

The darkness was so intense that he could not see the objects of his pursuit, but he stole close enough to hear the murmur of their voices, without distinguishing the words of their conversation.

Suddenly, when they had walked more than a mile, there was a bright flash in the road ahead of the detective.

Burton was lighting a cigar.

In the momentary and spasmodic flashes of the lighted match, Nick made a discovery.

He was no longer following an aged couple, but Doctor Burton and the woman Zel in their true characters.

They had taken advantage of the darkness to discard their disguises, doubtless feeling entirely safe from observation, and confident of their immunity from discovery.

The walk lasted a long time, and thrice Nick nearly lost track of the conspirators in the darkness, as they made sudden turns.

When they had traversed about three miles—the sound of their voices suddenly ceased, and Nick paused irresolutely, and listened.

But he heard nothing.

He was standing underneath the spreading branches of a long row of elms, but the blackness of the night prevented him from seeing anything beyond them.

Suddenly, from beyond the trees, he heard the deep bay of a hound, and then a stern command uttered in a man's voice:

"Down, Satan!" said the voice.

He recognized it instantly as belonging to Burton.

"Ah!" he muttered. "Here is the castle, and I have got to get past that bloodhound in order to gain admittance. Well, I have undertaken harder jobs than this one, and I must not fail now."

He knew perfectly well the importance of every moment. He knew that the woman Zel had determined to murder both Clarita and Ethel that night. She might set about her fiendish work at once, or she might delay the double crime for a while.

Nick argued that necessarily there would be some preparations to make, and he felt he might safely count upon an hour, before the danger of his wife and Clarita would be imminent.

His first care would have to be to get past the ferocious dog, without alarming the people in the castle.

It was no easy undertaking. But there was no time to be lost.

He must advance without delay, if he hoped to save his wife and the beautiful Clarita from the terrible fate which threatened them.

Soon he could see the windows of Cliff Castle, from several of which lights gleamed out in the darkness.

On he went, every sense upon the alert for the dog, which he expected at every instant to pounce upon him.

But, as he proceeded, he heard no sound until suddenly, right in front of him, almost at his feet, he heard a low, deep growl.

The trying moment had arrived. He was given no time to think.

Immediately following the growl, he dimly saw a huge, dark body hurl itself through the air at him, and then the bloodhound was upon him.

The brute had been rightly named Satan.

Nick had no weapon in his grasp. He had not been given time to draw one. But as the dog launched itself forward, he seized it by the throat with both hands.

A man of less prodigious strength than the detective would have fallen a prey to the ferocious brute at once, but even the animal's strength was not great enough to overcome that of Nick Carter.

In seizing the dog, he had been fortunate, for in the darkness he had not been able to calculate upon the act. However, both hands encircled the creature's throat, and then he squeezed with all his might.

The dog could not bark; he could not even growl. He could not bite, for his jaws were distended by the terrible choking, and he could not close them. But he could struggle and scratch with his massive claws, and for three or four minutes the ordeal was the worst that the detective had ever experienced.

To release his hold, however little, meant death. If the beast should gain the slightest advantage, he would make the most of it.

It was a question of hanging on, for both of them, and the one that hung on the best was the one who would come out of the fight victorious.

In the struggle, Nick fell to the ground, and then he and the dog rolled over and over in a mad effort for victory.

Not a sound escaped either of them. The dog could not make one, and Nick knew that if the occupants of the castle should hear aught of what was going on, there would be no hope left of rescuing those whom he had come there to save.

Suddenly the strength of the dog seemed to give way. Nick's hands were clenched so tightly around his throat that he could not breathe. Even a dog's strength is not proof against such severe punishment as that.

Nick realized that he was winning. He choked harder and harder.

At last the animal's body began to grow lax, and its struggles were weaker with every effort.

As suddenly as they had commenced, they ceased altogether, and at last Nick dared to remove one hand from the brute's throat, and with it he drew a knife.

Then, with careful precision, he drove the weapon through Satan's heart.

The dog was dead.

Beyond a few scratches, and the great exertion that he had been obliged to undergo, Nick was uninjured.

He took the precaution to drag the body into the shrubbery, for the fight had occurred in the pathway, and then he continued on his way toward the house. It was soon reached.

A glance showed him the way to the stables, and he hastened along, intent upon finding Chick, if he could.

The stable door was locked, but the lock was an ordinary one, and in a trice Nick had it open.

He passed in, and immediately drew his bull's-eye lantern. He pushed back the mask which hid the light, and the ray fell upon the face of a young negro, who was standing directly in front of him.

The negro was not ten feet away, and he held a revolver in either hand, both of which were pointing directly at Nick.

It was Chick.

They recognized each other instantly.

"Chick!" exclaimed the detective. "I am glad that I have found you so soon."

"So am I. How did you get past Satan?"

"Killed him."

"How?"

"Choked him to death."

"Get bitten?"

"No."

"Good!"

"Can you get into the house?"

"You bet."

"How many are there?"

"Seven."

"Seven!"

"Yes."

"Who are they?"

"Doc Burton."

"Yes."

"Zel and Miss Downing, but nobody knows which is which."

"Why?"

"Because they are exactly alike."

"You say there are two."

"Yes."

"Have you seen them together?"

"Yes."

"Do they appear together, as a rule?"

"No, never."

"But you have seen them?"

"I have."

"One is called Zel?"

"Yes."

"Have you recognized her, Chick?"

"No."

"Does her face strike you as at all familiar?"

"No."

"She is the woman who tried to put my eyes out with vitriol, when we had our last set-to with Quartz."

"Well—well!"

"That's what I said."

"I see it all now."

"I thought you would. You have named three. Who are the other four?"

"Servants."

"Men or women?"

"Three women; one man."

"Will they be in our way?"

"The man may, and one of the women."

## CHAPTER III.

### A MINISTER OF DEATH.

"Chick, do you know that they have two prisoners here?"

"No. Who?"

"Where have your eyes been?"

"Miss Downing sent me away; I suppose the prisoners were brought here while I was gone."

"Probably."

"Who are they?"

"Ethel and Clarita."

"What?"

"It is true."

"Explain."

"There is no time now. Have you seen Peter?"

"No."

"Not at all?"

"No."

"Then he is also a prisoner."

"What makes you think so?"

"I sent him here."

"To see me?"

"Yes."

"I have not seen him."

"Burton and Zel just got back."

"Yes, I heard them."

"They mean to murder Ethel and Clarita to-night."

"Here?"

"Yes."

"We will prevent them."

"Come now."

"No, wait. They will do nothing for an hour, at least."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because I know their habits."

"Have you any idea where they would confine the prisoners?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In what they call the 'west end.'"

"Where is that?"

"At the other end of the house."

"Do you know the approach?"

"Yes."

"How do we get in?"

"There is only one way."

"What is it?"

"Through the house."

"We will have to pass the living rooms?"

"Yes."

"Then we had better wait a while."

"Yes."

"Now, how much have you discovered since you have been here?"

"Considerable, and yet not much."

"Who is Burton?"

"The husband of one of them—of Zel, or the cousin?"

"You don't know which one is the wife of Burton?"

"No; but I suspect——"

"What?"

"That he married the cousin."

"Doubtless."

"And that he is in love with Zel."

"Ah!"

"She is the prime mover in all this work."

"Of course."

"The other—the cousin, is little better than a dummy."

"Why?"

"She isn't straight here," and Chick tapped his forehead significantly.

"What is the cause?"

"Zel."

"Ah!"

"They both—Burton and Zel—want to get rid of her entirely."

"I see."

"I think they mean to do it to-night."

"Doubtless."

"If we weren't here to interfere, it would be a regular carnival of murder."

"Well, we are here, Chick."

They were silent for a moment.

"Hark!" whispered Nick suddenly.

Then he turned and leaped through the door, out into the darkness.

He had heard somebody approaching the house, and he guessed who it was.

Keeping in the shadow of the shrubbery, he crept toward the great front door. Just as he gained a point where he could see it opened, in the light that shone out, he recognized the lawyer, Greenleaf, and Doctor Spleen.

They had lost no time in reaching the castle, although they had been obliged to cross the river in the night.

They were disguised, but so imperfectly that any one who knew them and was on the lookout for them would have found no difficulty in recognizing them at once.

"The seven have grown to nine, three of whom I know to be desperate men," mused Nick.

He started to retrace his steps to the stable, when he fancied that he heard a movement among the bushes near him.

He paused and listened attentively. But the sound was not repeated.

Two or three minutes he waited, and then, hearing nothing, he started on again.

Again he heard the noise. It was very slight, but yet enough to attract his attention.

In an instant he knew that he was followed by some person or thing.

To be followed meant to be exposed, and under the circumstances he could not risk that.

What to do in order to capture the shadow was the next thing. He thought it over carefully for a moment, and then started on again.

The noise was heard again.

It was such as a wild animal might make in creeping after an intended victim, of whom it intended to make a meal.

Suddenly, when the right point was reached, Nick turned and leaped backward in the direction of the sound.

The motion was so quick that the unknown shadow had no time to dodge him.

It was there, and Nick seized it.

For a moment there was a fierce struggle, and then Nick realized that he had seized a mere lad.

Like a flash, it occurred to him that it was Patsy who had followed the two men.

Holding the lad so that he could not move, he bent over and whispered:

"Is it Patsy?"

"Yep."

"Good! Get up, Pat, and follow me."

"Sure, ye've choked me most to death, so ye have."

"Never mind now. You're a good boy. Come on."

"I'm a-comin'."

They were soon in the stable, where Patsy and Chick were speedily made known to each other.

"Now, Patsy, how did you get here?" asked Nick.

"On the train."

"How did you cross the river?"

"On a little boat, be gob! It was no bigger'n a rowboat."

"A launch?"

"Yep."

"Can you find it again?"

"You bet."

"Is there anybody with it?"

"Nary a body."

"The two men came over together?"

"Yep."

"How did you come?"

"Sure, I kim wid 'em."

"What, in the same boat?"

"You bet."

"Didn't they see you?"

"Divil a see."

"How did you manage it?"

"I followed them to the boat after we left the train."

"Well?"

"They forgot something, and wan of 'em went back fur it. While he was gone, the other went away about a rod."

"Yes."

"It was my chance, an' I tuk it."

"How?"

"Sure, I clim inty the boat."

"And hid yourself?"

"Yep. I laid down under the seat where they had to set. Sure the boat wasn't big enough to hide anywhere else."

"Lucky they didn't find you, Pat."

"You bet."

"Do you know what they would have done?"

"Yep. Chucked me in the river."

"Yes, after chucking a knife into you first."

"Well, they didn't see me, see?"

"All this is very well, Patsy, but you didn't obey orders."

"Nope."

"Why didn't you?"

"No use."

"Why?"

"Knowed you was gone."

"How?"

"Heered doc and the counselor talkin'."

"Ah! What did they say?"

"Said t'other two had gone t'other way."

"Well?"

"I knew you'd folly 'em, and so wouldn't be there at the West Shore Depot when I got there ef I went; so I didn't go."

"All right, Patsy."

"Thought I might be of use here, and here I am."

"You're a brave boy, Patsy."

"I ain't afeared, anyhow."

"That's right. There is hot work ahead to-night, Patsy."

"Be I in it?"

"I don't know."

"Lemme, will you?"

"You might get hurt."

"Wot of it?"

"Or even be killed."

"Well, wot o' that? Killin' don't hurt much, I guess."

"Have you got any weapons?"

"Two fists an' a bit av a stick."

"Here's a revolver; take it."

"T'anks."

"Now, Chick, come on."

"It's a little early yet."

"Even so. I would rather face a dozen men, single-handed, than stand here and do nothing. You know the way into the house?"

"Certainly."

"And to the west end, when once we are inside?"

"Rather."

"You can take us in without noise?"

"I can."

"Good! Take off your shoes. Patsy, off with yours. Now, let there be no sound—not the slightest breath to betray us. There are four men in that house, any one of whom will kill us if he can, and there is one woman who is more to be feared than all the men put together. Are you ready, Chick?"

"Yes."

"And you, Patsy?"

"Yep."

"Come, then."

Chick led them to the back part of the house, but instead of approaching a door, he went to one of the windows that formed the conservatory.

"I fixed this for just such an emergency," he managed to whisper to Nick.

A moment more and he reached it.

Then he turned four little buttons which he had adjusted at a previous time, and the next moment a large part of the sash swung out, leaving an opening for them to enter.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A SINISTER CONVERSATION.

It must not be supposed that because the edifice was named Cliff Castle it was in any sense a castle. It was simply a very large and rambling house, of the modern type, although quite old. It stood upon an eminence overlooking the river, and from that fact had been named Cliff Castle.

The Downing family had been one of immense wealth, and nothing had been spared in making the place not only beautiful, but elegant.

Chick, as a colored hostler, had had but little opportunity for studying the interior of the building, but he had improved that little.

It was for that purpose that he had made the entrance by way of the conservatory, and on two occasions he had entered the house with his little masked lantern in hand, and had thoroughly learned the "lay of the land." He knew enough to know that they had to pass through the part of the house that was most in use, in order to reach the west end. He was satisfied that that was where they would find the prisoners, and events proved that he was right.

Chick led the way, because it was known to him. Patsy came next, and Nick brought up the rear.

Passing through the conservatory, which was filled with plants, Chick led them past some curtains, and they were in the dining room of the mansion.

From there, out into the hallway, past an open door, and toward another, which was also open, and from which a stream of light was thrown into the more dimly lighted hall.

Voices also issued from the open door, and, listening, they heard the silvery but ominous laugh of the woman Zel.

Nick stepped in front of Chick, and motioned his companions to wait. Then, prone upon the floor, he crept forward until he could peer into the room.

It seemed as though a general consultation was being held there. There were two women present, and at first glance it appeared as though there were two Clarita Downings.

Both were exactly alike in feature and in dress. The closest observer could not have told the difference. When they spoke their voices were also the same, and in every respect both were counterparts of Clarita, who at that moment was a prisoner in some remote part of the house.

Besides the women there were the three men with whom Nick had already had one struggle.

Burton was speaking when Nick was near enough to catch the words that were uttered.

It was only the last half of a sentence that he caught, but it was suggestive, and he waited for more.

"—dangerous in the extreme, I tell you," he was saying, "and if there is another way I vote for it."

"Bah!" said one of the women, in reply, and instinctively Nick knew that she was Zel. "Where is the danger?"

"Nick Carter is alive."

"Do you think he can trace them here?"

"Certainly."

"How?"

"He has already made a shrewd guess. He proved that by——"

"By sending his servants here, eh?"

"Yes."

"What of that?"

"A good deal."

"Bah! it was only guesswork."

"Granted. We made it certainty."

"How?"

"By capturing the servant."

"We could not do otherwise."

"No, but it will give us away."

"How?"

"Peter will not return."

"No."

"Carter will know what keeps him, and why he is kept."

"Well?"

"That will make his suspicion a certainty."

Zel laughed.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Burton.

"Because you are so simple."

"In what way?"

"My dear Burt, don't you suppose that we can fix Peter?"

"How?"

"By a little dose of medicine."

"Ah!"

"All we have got to do will be to dose him and turn him loose in New York."

"I see."

"He will be found; his mind will be gone; he will not know where he has been, and will never be able to tell anything that has happened. He will be sent to an asylum, and Nick Carter will have not the slightest clew regarding the spot where his wife perished."

"But he will suspect."

"Let him."

"He will hunt us down."

"And what will we be doing in the meantime?"

"Hunting him down, I suppose."

"Exactly."

"He will come here."

"I ask for nothing better."

"If he comes——"

"He will never go back."

"You are a treasure, Zel."

"I am a winner every time."

"I believe you are."

"You know I am."

"Well, what do you propose?"

"That we get rid of the whole crowd to-night."

She looked significantly at the doctor as she spoke, and Nick saw a meaning glance exchanged between them.

He saw through her schemes in an instant.

"They will play into my hands," he thought.

And they did.

"How will you dispose of them?" asked Greenleaf.

"Now, or after they are dead?" asked Zel placidly.

"Well, in both instances."

"First we will dose them."

"Exactly. With poison?"

"Yes."

"How will you get them to take it?"

"Easily."

"But how?"

"In the water they drink, perhaps."

"They may not drink."

"Ah, well, there is an easier way."

"How?"

"What matter, so long as I accomplish it?"

"When will you do this?"

"In an hour they will be dead."

"What are we to do—Spleen and I?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"No; go to bed and go to sleep. When you awake the work will be done, and you will have had no hand in it."

"A good idea."

"Doctor Burton and I will attend to the work for all of you."

"For all of us?"

"Yes."

"That sounds as if——"

"As if I was letting you down easily, eh?"

"Yes."

"So I am."

"What rooms shall we take? I am tired out."

"The one you have had before and the one next to it."

"How do you like the scheme, Bell?" asked Burton.

"I leave it all to Zelma."

"Ah; that's kind of you."

A few moments later the two men, Greenleaf and Spleen, rose to leave the room, and Nick, followed by Chick and Patsy, hurried back into the dining room.

From there he saw the men come out and ascend the stairs, and a moment later Bell followed, and doubtless went at once to her room.

Then Nick stole back again along the hall.

Again he peered into the room where Burton and Zel were plotting.

Zel had opened a small cabinet which hung upon the wall at one end of the room, and was busy selecting phials from the shelves that it contained.

"Do you mean what you suggested, Zel?" asked Burton.

"Certainly."

"You will kill them all?"

"All."

"Even Bell?"

"Even Bell."

"You forget that she is my wife."

They both laughed.

"I will make you a widower."

"That will be nice, but——"

"But what?"

"I won't remain one long."

"No?"

"No, Zel; you have promised."

"Good. I will keep my word when you are ready."

"Zel, I think your very fiendishness makes me love you more and more."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"You had better not forget to keep it up, then."

"Why?"

"I might serve you the same trick that I am serving your wife."

"Bah! I don't fear it."

"Why not?"

"You love me too well; I am too necessary to you."

"So you are, Burt."

"I am curious on one point."

"What is it?"

"You will have six dead bodies in this house in the morning."

"Yes, six. Well?"

"What in the world will you do with them?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Exactly—nothing."

"But, Zel——"

"Well?"

"Think of it! Six dead bodies. One can't dig a hole deep enough to hold them; one can't throw them into the river; one can't——"

"One won't."

"What will you do?"

"Leave them here."

"But what of ourselves?"

"We are going away."

"Going away?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"We will vanish."

"We will be pursued."

"You may. I won't."

"Why not you?"

"I will be thought to be dead."

"How so?"

"Fool! don't you see?"

"No."

"Isn't Bell supposed to be dead?"

"Yes."

"Won't two women who look exactly alike be found here, and won't I be thought to be one of them?"

## CHAPTER V.

### BROKEN FAITH.

Burton started as though stung by a bee as soon as the full significance of Zel's words was realized by him.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "I see!"

"Do you, really?"

"Yes."

"How bright!"

"I will be the only one known to have left here alive."

"Yes."

"And therefore I will be——"

"You will be more than ever in the power of the woman you love."

"You do love me, Zel?"

"Can you doubt it?"

"But when I am hunted as a murderer?"

"When that happens I will love you more than ever."

"Promise me that."

"I promise."

"You place me in a hard position by to-night's work, Zel."

"Too hard?"

"No, not if you ask it."

"I do."

"Then it is settled."

"That is right, Burt."

"Another question."

"Well?"

"What about money?"

"Do you think that I would neglect that?"

"No."

"I have not."

"What have you done?"

"Converted everything into cash that I could."

"How much did you get?"

"Between eight and nine hundred thousand."

"All cash?"

"All cash."

"And you have it here?"

"Yes."

"In this house?"

"Yes."

"About you?"

"Burt, do I look like a fool?"

"No."

"Do I act like one?"

"No."

"Wouldn't I be one if I should tell you where that money is?"

"Why?"

"Would you hesitate to take the game as well as the name?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you could place your hand upon that money you would not hesitate to leave me here a corpse with the others."

"Oh, Zel, Zel!"

"Oh, Burt, Burt! Don't be a fool!"

"But to think——"

"Yes, to think! Don't think. Act!"

"How?"

"Help me do this work."

"Willingly."

"When it is done we will go away together, anywhere, and we will live like royalty."

"We will."

While she was uttering the last few words she uncorked a little phial that she had taken from the cabinet.

When she ceased speaking she placed it to her nostrils, and seemed to test it by the smell.

Burton was watching her narrowly.

She took the phial away, and seemed to consider for a moment.

Then she placed it under her nostrils again.

"I think I have a cold, Burt," she said.

"Why?"

"I cannot smell."

"That is unfortunate."

"Yes. I must make no mistake."

"For what are you searching?"

"A drug that smells like coffee."

"Is that it?"

"I don't know; I can't smell."

"Perhaps I can tell."

"I wish you would."

"Hand it here."

"Be careful and don't spill it on your hands."

"Why?"

"It would be worse than molten iron."

"It would?"

"Yes."

"You keep terrible stuffs, Zel."

"They are legacies from Doctor Quartz."

"He must have been a devil."

"He was."

"What should this smell like?"

"Strong coffee."

"I will tell you in an instant. There is no harm in smelling, is there?"

"No, certainly not."

He placed the phial beneath his nose and sniffed strongly.

Instantly he uttered a loud cry, and staggered back. The phial dropped from his grasp to the floor.

Zel paid no attention to him, but she leaped forward, seized the phial, and recorked it.

Meanwhile Burton was staggering blindly around the room. He tried to call out, but could not.

Suddenly he tottered, and, reeling, fell at full length.

She watched him for a moment with an evil smile upon her face; watched him until he ceased to struggle.

He was dead.

"One," said the heartless woman, and she laughed aloud.

Then she leaned forward, and gazed at her victim.

"What a sight Nick Carter will find when he comes here," she murmured.

"Everybody in the house will be dead, even the servants, and the best of science will not reveal what killed them. I will be dead, too—that is, they will think I am, for Bell and Clarita will represent Clarita and me. For once Nick Carter will be utterly foiled. His wife will be dead, and he will think her murderer dead, too. He will not even search, for he will consider that death has robbed him of his revenge. Ah, this is better than killing him, for it will break his heart. How I hate him! How I hate him! Poor Burt. I am rather sorry for you, but I could not risk letting you live. Let me see. How much time have I?"

She looked at her watch.

"The time is ample, but I must begin at once. Whom shall I visit first? There are only a few left to do for, because, unless I am greatly mistaken, Bell, and Greenleaf, and Spleen are already among the vast majority. There only remain the servants and the prisoners."

Even Nick shuddered at her coolness when she talked of the wholesale murders she was committing. He judged from her words that she had arranged the death potion for the lawyer, the doctor, and Bell Burton earlier in the night, so that they had fallen victims when they went to their rooms.

He would have prevented the murders if he could, but there had been no chance. All that he could do now was to watch the woman, and prevent her from doing more harm. He thought of entering the room at once and putting the irons on her. A second thought, however, persuaded him to wait.

Zel was talking aloud, and by listening he was gaining much information.

For a moment she seemed to hesitate whether to go at once to the commission of the other crimes that she contemplated, or to wait.

Presently she sank into an easy-chair, and lighted a cigarette.

For several moments she smoked on in silence, calmly regarding the body of the man who, only a few moments ago, had told her he loved her.

"I don't like to see that," she muttered finally.

There were heavy curtains in the room, half concealing a bookcase, and she rose and pulled one of them down.

She threw it over the body of Burton, and reseated herself, continuing her smoking as calmly as though the corpse of her murdered victim were not lying at her feet.

Then she drew something from her bosom. It was a little packet. She undid it, and disclosed to the view of the detective a large roll of bills, a check book, and a bundle of certified checks.

"Here is the fortune for which I have toiled," she murmured. "I wonder if I will be content to live without killing somebody now? I doubt it. Murder is my pastime—my one pleasure. But I am forgetting. There is another package that I must investigate."

She went again to the cabinet where she kept her poisons.

Opening it she drew out a small package, carefully done up in red tape.

"'Package 17—A,'" she read. "I think I had better open this. It is the legacy that Philip left, and, no doubt, it contains the mystic ring and other things equally valuable. Well, I don't care for it now. The fellow thought that he had hidden it where I never would find it, but he didn't know me. 'Package 17—A.' I wonder what the '17—A' means. Nothing, probably. Ah, well, I will leave it here in the cabinet until I have finished my work. Then I will take it with me and examine it at my leisure."

She put it back in the cabinet, which she closed and locked, after removing another phial, at which she glanced with the same sort of fierce fondness that a tigress displays when watching her young at play.

"Now for the final coup," she exclaimed, and, with the phial in her hand, she started toward the door behind which Nick was concealed.

For an instant he hesitated whether to let her pass or not.

By her own words he knew that the men who had gone upstairs were already dead, and that he would have no opposition in finding and rescuing his wife and Clarita when once Zel should be overpowered and a prisoner.

Realizing his power, and desiring to learn as much of the fiendish woman's plans as possible, he decided to let her go on, and to foil her at just the right moment.

Therefore, as she approached, he drew back.

She passed him with no thought that she was observed.

Humming an air from "Il Trovatore" as gayly as though she were upon an errand of no import whatever, she reached the stairs, and began to ascend.

## CHAPTER VI.

### NICK'S QUICKEST CHANGE.

When the woman reached the top of the stairs, still humming the air from "Il Trovatore," she paused and looked suddenly behind her, as if half expecting to see the shadowy, spectral form of her dead victim hovering near her.

"Pshaw!" she murmured, and then moved on again, still singing.

If she had glanced backward an instant sooner or later she would have discovered Nick. But she did not.

When Zel looked back, Nick was in the act of passing a statue of Apollo, which stood in the hall at the end of the balustrade. He instantly crouched behind it, and thus escaped discovery.

She had no sooner got beyond the head of the stairs than, with a rapid, gliding motion, Nick was after her.

Behind him, at a suitable distance, came Chick and Patsy, for he had motioned to them to follow him.

The woman Zel went straight to a door which communicated with a room at the front of the house. She placed her hand upon the knob, then she paused with seeming irresolution.

Suddenly she drew her handkerchief from her pocket, and, with a quick motion, bound it tightly around her face, so that her nostrils and mouth were completely protected. Then she opened the door.

But, even then, she held one hand against the handkerchief, as if to press it more tightly in place, and so avoid breathing the poisoned air with which the room she was about to enter was filled.

The upper hallway was dark. A faint light glimmered away in the rear, which, however, afforded almost no illumination at the point where Zel was standing.

Thus Nick was enabled to get quite close to her, and he was, in fact, but a few feet behind her when she crossed the threshold of that fatal room.

It was lighted, and, in contrast with the darkness of the hall, seemed brilliant. It was the room which Isabel Danton occupied, and which she had entered alive for the last time.

In the middle of the floor she was stretched, face downward, lifeless.

She had evidently fallen just as Burton had fallen in the room below, dying almost instantly.

"Two," muttered Zel, the word sounding hoarse and guttural as it forced its way through the handkerchief.

"She evidently counts her victims only as she sees them," thought Nick.

For a moment she bent over the prostrate form of her counterpart, then, hastening to the windows, she threw them wide open, thus permitting the air to circulate through the room of death.

For five minutes she stood thus. Then she removed the handkerchief from her face, and reclosed the windows.

Returning to the dead body she bent over it, and a beautiful smile hovered about her rosy lips.

"Aye, you are beautiful," she murmured, "but you are dead. All beauty must die, and some day I must follow you. What made us so strangely alike, you and Clarita and I? For the resemblance between you and Clarita I can easily account, but for mine to you both there is no explanation. It is strange—strange—very strange."

For a moment she remained thus in silent thought. Then, turning abruptly, she extinguished the gas.

Nick had barely time to dart back along the hall to the place where Chick and Patsy were standing ere she appeared in the doorway, and rapidly approached them.

There was just time, however, for the detective to give instructions for the furtherance of a plan which at that moment occurred to him.

"Chick!" he whispered.

"Yes," replied Chick.

"You can easily find the room where Ethel and Clarita are confined?"

"I can."

"Listen, then."

"I am all attention."

"Isabel Danton is dead!"

"Where is she?"

"In that room."

"When did she die?"

"Since she came upstairs. I want you to go to that room, take the body of Isabel Danton in your arms, and carry it to the apartment occupied by Clarita and Ethel."

"All right."

"Leave the body there. Tell Ethel to place it in the bed, as though sleeping."

"Good."

"Also to fix up a dummy representing herself as sleeping, too."

"Good."

"Then turn the lights low, if any are there, and conduct Ethel and Clarita to the room from which you will have taken the body of Isabel. Do you understand?"

"Well, rather."

"Go now, for she is coming."

"But suppose she meets them in the hall?"

"She will not."

"Why?"

"I will see to that. Go."

All three concealed themselves upon the stairs until Zel had passed them, walking rapidly toward the rear end of the hall.

Then, with a quick motion, Nick indicated that Patsy was to accompany Chick, and the two hurried off to carry the well-laid plan into execution.

No sooner had they gone than Nick crept along the hall after Zel. He thought he knew exactly where she was going, and he was right.

Again the woman resorted to the use of the handkerchief. Again she entered a room, which was lighted like the first one.

There, upon the floor, were two bodies, still and cold in death. They were those of the lawyer, Greenleaf, and Doctor Spleen.

Here also Zel went through the same maneuvers, airing the room to make it tenantable. Then, gazing at the corpses of her victims, she laughed outright.

Presently she lighted a cigarette, and, between the flarings of the match by which she ignited it, she murmured:

"So must perish all who stand in my way, whether actively or passively."

For a moment she regarded them, and then she turned toward the light. Nick saw that she was about to extinguish it. He knew that her next move would be to go to the room in which Ethel and Clarita were imprisoned. He also knew that there had not yet been time for Chick to have carried into operation the plan which he had outlined.

Zel must be delayed. In an instant Nick decided what to do.

With one quick leap, while Zel's back was turned toward him, he reached and seized the door. Then he waited for her to extinguish the light. It was done an instant later.

In the same second he pulled the door violently shut. It slammed with a noise that could be heard throughout all that massive edifice.

Then silently, and like a shadow, the detective retreated again to the stairway. He had no sooner reached it than the door opened, and Zel, looking perturbed and frightened, sprang into the hall.

She glanced quickly around her.

"Bah!" he heard her exclaim. "I wonder if I am getting nervous. It must have been a draft. And yet, from whence could it have come?"

For a minute she hesitated.

Nick, in the meantime, was busily conjecturing what he should do to delay her still longer from visiting the room which he did not care to have her enter yet.

But it would not do for her to remain in the hall where she then was.

If she did so, she would surely discover the presence of others, when Chick should conduct Ethel and Clarita to the place agreed upon. Such a consequence would entirely frustrate Nick's plans. But he was left without the necessity of acting.

The good luck of the detective clung to him, even at that moment.

The violent slamming of the door had evidently unnerved the murderous woman.

"I will wait a little," she muttered.

And then, with that same rapid, gliding motion which seemed to be a part of her, she started toward the stairs where Nick was crouching.

He retreated rapidly.

She followed him down, and he, still avoiding her line of vision, darted through the open door which led into the darkened room that he had first noticed upon entering the lower hall, and which was next to the library, where the body of Doctor Burton was lying.

"Will she return to the library?" thought Nick.

But she did not.

She kept on through the hall, and entered the dining room at the end of it. There she speedily procured a light, and approached the sideboard.

Nick watched her from the hall. He saw her open the sideboard, and take therefrom a bottle of wine and some cake, which she placed upon the table.

Then she seated herself, and began to eat and drink.

"Of all the cold-blooded devils that I ever heard of," thought Nick, "this woman is the worst. But her act gives me time for another little plan."

Leaving her to enjoy her lunch, he hurried to the library.

It required only an instant to throw aside the curtain which covered the body of Doctor Burton.

"Now, Nick," muttered the detective, "if there ever was an occasion in your life for quick work you have it here."

And he did work quickly.

The disguise of the Irishman, which he had worn since leaving the train, disappeared like magic.

The room was full of mirrors, and was brilliantly lighted. The detective could stand where he was and see himself in half a dozen positions by glancing from one mirror to another.

A moment's earnest study of the dead man's face was sufficient for a beginning.

In a trice Nick adjusted a mustache to his own lip, trimmed it, and waxed the ends until it was the same shape as Burton's.

Next he moistened a felt pad which he took from one of his pockets, and with it he stained his face to the swarthy hue of Doctor Burton's complexion.

Then he darted to the hallway, and peered into the dining room.

Zel was still eating and drinking.

He returned quickly to the library, and continued his work.

A wig of closely cropped black hair was placed upon his head. Then, with deft fingers, he undid the collar and tie from the dead man's neck, and removed the coat and vest.

Taking off his own he donned those which had belonged to Burton, and then, with a few quick touches here and there, he stood revealed, a perfect representation of the murdered physician.

Concealing his own costume in one corner of the room, he hastened again into the hall.

He was just in time.

Had he occupied another moment he must have been discovered, for Zel was in the act of leaving the table and he had barely time to enter the darkened room before she passed the door.

## CHAPTER VII.

### BURTON'S GHOST.

The lunch which Zel had taken evidently had replenished her nerve as well as invigorated her body, for she came out of the room with a smile upon the beautiful face which was such a contrast to her nature.

She was, without doubt, prepared for the remainder of her work, and did not propose to delay longer.

Nick wondered what had become of the servants, of whom Chick had spoken. Had she already made away with them?

The woman seemed to have no dread of interruption.

If the servants were still in the house, and alive, she must necessarily have given their proximity some thought. But she did not seem to do so. Possibly she had already murdered them. Possibly she had dismissed them, and so spared their lives.

Nick wondered if she would enter the library again.

He hardly thought she would, however, as there was nothing there that she required.

Her act in throwing the curtain over the body of Doctor Burton had convinced him that she did not enjoy gazing upon the features of her dead lover, and he had no fear that she would discover in that way the trick that he had played.

But, although she paused at the door of the library and looked in, she did not enter.

A moment only, and then she continued on her way toward the stairs.

Nick glided after her. He had less fear of discovery now than before he had made the change. In his present character he knew that he could frighten her.

He had heard enough of the voice of Doctor Burton to imitate it perfectly if occasion required.

Nick knew that Chick had had ample time to carry out his part of the program, and he was perfectly willing to allow the woman to proceed on her way up the stairs, through the hall, and then off through a side corridor which led to the west end of the building.

Looking back, as he was about turning down the side corridor, Nick caught sight of Patsy, skulking in the hall.

He made a quick motion, which brought Patsy to him on a run.

"Is everything all right, Pat?" he whispered.

The boy nodded.

"Tell Chick to go to the library."

"Yep."

"To take the body of Burton and put it in the dining room, under a table."

"Yep."

"Then to wait."

"Yep."

"Skip."

"Yep."

Nick followed Zel.

She went down the corridor to the end. There, with a key, she opened a door.

It led into a room where a very dim light was burning.

Objects were scarcely discernible, and yet two beds could be seen in opposite corners of the room. Both were half hidden by curtains. To one of them Zel went on tiptoe. It happened to be the one in which Chick had placed the corpse of the murdered Isabel.

In the dim light Zel could not see that the body was that of a corpse. She could only see that it was the face of Clarita.

It was enough.

Zel let the curtain fall back into place, and silently retreated. Then she bound her face in the handkerchief as she had done before. After that she poured into a saucer the contents of one of the little phials that she carried. Then she struck a match and ignited it. It burned like oil.

No sooner had the blaze mounted than Zel beat a hasty retreat. She rapidly left the room and closed the door behind her, while Nick crouched in the corridor, close enough to the murderess to have touched her had he reached out his hand to do so.

"It is done!" she said, aloud. "Done, and I am free, with all that fortune at my command. My plans have worked, and I have won. Doctor Quartz was a great man, but I am greater than he ever was. Where he failed I have succeeded. I was an apt pupil!"

She started along the hall, and Nick pursued her, down the stairs and again into the library.

She entered, at first not noticing that the body of Doctor Burton was gone.

Suddenly, however, she discovered it was missing.

She paused, and for the first time a deathlike pallor swept over her features.

"Where has he gone?" she breathed.

She looked furtively around her.

"He could not go away himself, because he was dead," she muttered. "What then? Ah! the negro! I had forgotten him. But no! he could not enter the house, and besides, he would not dare."

She was frightened.

"Perhaps I did not kill him," she said; "perhaps—pshaw! He was dead, dead, dead! Burt!" she whispered; "Burt!"

"Well?" answered a voice behind her.

She wheeled like lightning.

As she did so she drew a revolver and fired it point-blank at the seeming apparition.

The act was done as quickly and as accurately as Nick could have done it himself.

Had he not been protected by the shirt of mail which he fortunately had on he must have been killed by the bullet.

As it was he stood unharmed.

Then he smiled.

"No use, Zel," he said coolly, in the voice of Burton. "I am beyond that now."

"Beyond it?"

"Yes; I am dead."

"Bah!"

"Did you not kill me, Zel?"

"Kill you?"

"Yes."

"Then how are you here?"

"I am a spirit."

"A spirit!"

"Yes; shoot again. Your bullets pass through me. They cannot kill a corpse."

She was struggling with her fright, and struggling bravely.

She was terrorized, and yet had too much nerve to show it.

"Ghost or no ghost, I will kill you again!" she cried, and she raised the weapon.

Again she aimed it at his heart. He stood unmoved.

She pulled the trigger.

The apparition only smiled.

"Try again, Zel," said Nick.

"Curse you!" she cried. "I will not believe that you are a ghost."

"And yet I am one."

"Why are you here?"

"For vengeance."

"Vengeance? Bah! Ghosts cannot injure one."

"Do you not fear me?"

"No."

"I will make you."

"You cannot."

"I will!"

"Do your worst."

"I will haunt you to the grave."

"Haunt away. You cannot scare me."

"You are a fiend."

"Aye, and fiends are not afraid of ghosts."

"Beware, Zel."

"Beware yourself! I am going to fire again, and this time at your head!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### PROOF AGAINST BULLETS.

In all of the varied experiences which Nick Carter had been through, the exhibition of nerve manifested by the woman Zel was the most remarkable that he had ever seen.

There was every evidence in her face that she did believe herself to be in the presence of the supernatural, and that she felt the consequent and nameless terror which such a belief inspires. Yet she bravely combatted the fear.

She remained face to face, unflinchingly, with the supposed ghost, nor did she give way for an instant to the terrible fear that was overwhelming her.

Twice had she fired a bullet at the apparition, and twice had it utterly failed to have any effect.

Yet, in spite of it all, she determined to make a third effort, and at the same time to try a new target for her skill.

"Stand where you are, if you are a ghost," she said coldly; but with the coldness which was born of the ice-like fear at her heart. "If you are not mortal, my bullet cannot harm your head any more than your heart. If you are mortal, you will die."

"As others besides me have died to-night, Zel?"

She laughed nervously.

"No, not as they have died. They died without knowing that death was near them, while you can see it now in the muzzle of this revolver."

Nick realized that he must do something to prevent her from shooting.

He was about to leap forward and end it all then and there by making her his prisoner, when he suddenly changed his mind.

She was in the act of raising her revolver.

In changing his glance, Nick's eyes rested for the fraction of an instant upon the chambers.

Brief as the glance was, he saw that the chamber which would revolve into place for the next shot was empty.

He had nothing to fear from it.

In an instant he decided what to do.

"Wait, Zel," he said.

"Why should I wait?"

"I wish you to take deliberate aim."

"I will."

"Good; I will count for you."

"You seem to enjoy being shot at."

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because every bullet that you fire, as well as every portion of poison that you have administered, will one day recoil upon you, and but add to the tortures which you must endure when you are as I am, dead!"

"Bah! Do you think to frighten me?"

"No, you have proved that I cannot."

"Yet you insist that you are a ghost."

"Yes."

"If this bullet fails, I will be convinced."

"I will count for you."

"Count?"

"Yes."

"Count, then."

"When I say 'three,' fire."

"I will."

"Take care of your aim."

"I will."

Nick had continued to talk, because he had contrived to take one of his own weapons from his pocket, unseen by her, during the conversation.

He held it behind him where she could not see it.

"Are you ready, Zel?" he asked then.

"Yes."

"You do not believe that I am Burt?"

"No."

"Who am I, then?"

"I do not know."

"Who could have gained admittance here? Who could have watched you at your work? Who could have seen you bend over the dead body of Isabel Danton? Who could have heard you laugh over the corpses of Greenleaf and Spleen? Who could have watched you when you went to the room where your two prisoners were confined, and ignited the drug, the fumes of which are so deadly? Who could have done all this, Zel, but I? And yet I was dead. Do you believe, now?"

"No."

"Who then am I?"

"There is but one man in all the world whom I fear."

"And who is he?"

"Nick Carter."

Nick laughed.

"Do you believe that I am he?" he asked.

"You may be."

"Yet I heard you defy him to-night."

"I did."

"You do not think that I am Nick Carter?"

"No."

"Nor a ghost. Are you ready to shoot?"

"I am."

"Very well," said Nick. "Aim at my forehead, straight between the eyes, and when I say 'three,' fire."

"One!"

She raised the revolver, and pointed it at him.

"Two!"

Her lips were firmly set, and the detective could see that she was taking careful aim.

"Three!"

She pulled the trigger.

There was a loud report.

But it was Nick's weapon and not hers which was discharged.

He had carefully calculated the instant when she would pull, and had fired then.

The illusion was perfect.

Her nervousness was so great that she did not know that her own weapon had missed fire.

Yet the apparition stood there, immovable, and with a derisive smile that seemed to bid defiance to her murderous intention.

For an instant she gazed wide-eyed upon the man before her. Then, without a sound, or a cry, with no warning whatever, she sank to the floor in a deathlike swoon.

"Her punishment has begun," muttered Nick; "but I have not done yet."

He hurried to the door. Patsy was lurking in the hall. He seized the boy, and took him with him into the dining room.

Then the body of Doctor Burton was quickly pulled from beneath the table, where Chick had placed it.

Again the detective set to work making a change. With Patsy's help, he was enabled to work much faster.

The coat, vest, collar, and tie were replaced upon the dead man.

Then, when Burton's body was restored to its original appearance, the detective quickly bore it back into the library.

He placed it upon the floor in the position that it had occupied before he disturbed it. Then, throwing the curtain over it, he went again into the hall.

Standing where he could watch all that happened in the library, he began another change, and, in two minutes he was again the man-of-war's man who had ridden with Burton and Zell upon the train when they came from the city to Cliff Castle.

Just as he finished, Zel began to show signs of returning consciousness.

She opened her eyes and looked around her wonderingly.

Presently she espied, in the middle of the floor, the curtain which seemed to cover the body that had so lately been missing.

The sight revived her suddenly.

With a bound, she was upon her feet.

Another, and she reached the curtain, and seized it.

Then, with a quick motion, she snatched it away from the body that it concealed.

"My God!" she cried. "Am I going mad? Have I lost my senses?"

She bent over the corpse.

She touched it with her fingers.

It was cold, and she started back, with a shuddering cry:

"Dead! Quite dead!" she cried. "And yet I saw him standing there but a moment ago——"

"Was he a ghost?" she whispered, glancing apprehensively around her. "Am I, indeed, haunted?"

Suddenly her fright left her.

"I am not hurt," she cried. "It is the living that I fear, not the dead."

Then she laughed loudly, boisterously.

"Enough of this!" she muttered. "The time has come for me to leave. All are dead but the negro; I will let him live, aye, I will let him live. He——"

She happened to glance toward the door. There stood the very person of whom she was speaking.

The negro was in her presence.

In an instant her hand flew to the weapon which had proved so futile against the apparition.

She raised it, pointed it at the negro, and pulled the trigger.

There was no report.

She tried again, but with the same result.

Then she threw the weapon from her, and brought out the poniard with which she had meant to murder Nick in the lawyer's office.

Grasping it in her right hand, she cautiously advanced.

The negro stood still—the reader knows that he was no other than Chick—there was no evidence of fear in his attitude. Noticing that fact, she hesitated.

"Where did you come from?" she demanded.

"From the stable," replied Chick, without using the negro dialect.

"How did you get here?"

"Through the conservatory."

"When?"

"Before you committed these murders."

"Ah! You are not a negro?"

"No."

"You are a detective?"

"Yes."

"You are Nick Carter?"

"No."

"Fool! Do you not know that in coming here, you have signed your own death warrant?"

"No."

"You will never leave here alive."

Chick smiled.

"Why don't you kill me, then?" he asked. "You are certainly in good practice."

"I can afford to wait."

"You are disarmed, except for that poniard."

"Do you think so? When the moment comes, you will die, Nick Carter, and yet I will not move."

"I tell you I am not Nick Carter.

"Bah!"

"I am Nick Carter, Zel," and the man-of-war's man appeared in the doorway.

"Ah!"

For a moment she seemed startled.

"Well," she exclaimed; "what of it?"

"You are my prisoner."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"Not yet, Nick."

"You cannot escape."

"I can and will."

"Not this evening, Zel."

"I will escape. Neither the detective nor the prison is made that can hold me."

"Zel, what have you done with Peter?"

"Who is Peter?"

"You know well enough."

"My memory is bad."

"Is he also dead?"

"Will you believe me if I answer?"

"Yes."

"He is not dead."

"Where is he?"

"Where, unless I liberate him, he will die the lingering death of starvation."

## CHAPTER IX.

### A RACE THROUGH THE DARK.

"I can find him," said Nick.

"You cannot," replied Zel.

"I can try."

"Yes, and fail."

"I never fail, Zel."

"Why don't you ask for your wife?"

"I do not need to do so."

"You have found her?"

"Yes."

"You take the discovery gently."

"Why not."

"She is dead."

"You are mistaken, Zel."

"I tell you she is dead."

"On the contrary, she lives."

"You lie!"

For reply, Nick turned and called:

"Ethel!"

A moment later Ethel appeared at the door, gazed a moment upon the scene, and then silently withdrew.

Zel was speechless.

Presently she spoke.

"You seem to be able to conjure up the forms of the dead," she said ironically.

"Yes—in this case."

"Does he live, also?" and she pointed at the form of Burton.

"No—he is dead."

"Ah, well, there is some comfort in that! Your wife lives, you say?"

"Yes."

"What of Clarita?"

"You admit that she is Clarita?"

"Of what use for me to deny it?"

"None."

"Is she alive?"

"Yes."

"And Isabel?"

"Is dead."

"And Greenleaf and Spleen?"

"Are dead."

"Indeed! You have the faculty of saving those whom you wish to have live, and permitting others to die."

Nick did not reply.

"You think that you can convict me of murder, don't you?"

"Certainly."

"How?"

"I saw you kill that man; I have ample proof that you killed the others."

"Are you a fool, Nick Carter?"

"I hope not."

"Where then is your proof?"

"I saw the deed."

"I will deny it."

"An autopsy will uphold me, Zel."

"On the contrary, it will not."

"We trifle."

"An autopsy will prove nothing. No trace of poison will be found. No mark of violence can be seen. There will be no way of accounting for these deaths, except as an unheard-of coincidence that so many should die in the same house, on the same night, of the same disease."

"And that is——"

"Apoplexy."

"Ah! You have used it before."

"I have."

She was standing in the very center of the room, close by the body of Doctor Burton while she spoke.

Not once had she moved from the spot where she had stopped when advancing upon Chick, before Nick appeared.

In every expression she wore a wonderful air of self-assurance, as though she felt no fear of the men who stood between her and the door.

Nick could account for her manner in but one way: He believed that she intended to defy them until the last minute, and then to kill herself by one of her own potent drugs.

But she had another reason, and it was soon to appear.

"We have talked long enough," she said.

"I think so—yes."

"Are you ready to arrest me, Nick?"

"Well, it's about time."

"Will you handcuff me?"

"I'll have to, Zel."

"Handcuff a woman?"

"No, a fiend."

"Then do it!"

As she uttered the exclamation, a wonderful thing happened.

Ere the last word had left her lips, Zel disappeared through the floor, dropping so quickly that she was gone in an instant.

The portion of the floor that had given way beneath her flew back into place with a loud snap, and the spot where the woman fiend had stood was vacant.

Then they saw why she had not feared them.

She knew a way of escape, and she had talked only for the purpose of gaining time in which to perfect her plans after she should work the secret spring which would let her through the floor.

The instant that she disappeared, Nick bounded forward.

He fell upon his hands and knees near the spot where he knew the spring must be.

As he searched, he gave hasty orders, talking while he looked for the spring.

"Patsy!" he called.

"Yep," said Patsy.

"You know where the launch is?"

"Yep."

"Go to it."

"Yep."

"Run!"

"Yep."

"If she appears there, order her to throw up her hands. She is unarmed, except for a poniard."

"Yep."

"If she disobeys, shoot her."

"Yep."

"If she obeys, keep her until I come."

"Yep."

"Go!"

"Yep."

He was gone.

"Chick!"

"Here!"

"Go to Ethel and Clarita. Stay with them till I come."

"Right."

"I have found the spring."

"Good!"

He pressed it even as he spoke, and disappeared as suddenly as Zel had done before him.

Nick fell about eight feet.

He alighted upon a soft mattress unhurt, and in total darkness. But his trusty little lantern was in his pocket. He brought it into use instantly. With the gleam of light that it afforded, he found that he was in a portion of the cellar beneath the house.

But there seemed to be no way of egress from the place. Brick walls surrounded the detective on every side. They seemed to be solid and impassable.

Zel, however, was not there. If she had got out, there must be a way for the detective.

Standing in the center of the place, Nick flashed his light first upon one side and then another. He saw no opening; no place where there was any appearance of a door.

Suddenly the detective espied a cask, rolled into one corner of the little cellar. He leaped toward it, and attempted to roll it away. It did not move.

"The opening is here," he exclaimed.

With all his strength he kicked against the head of the cask. It fell away from his foot easily.

Stooping down and peering through, he saw, by the light of his bull's-eye, that he had only to crawl through the empty cask to get out of the cellar he was in.

To think was to act.

He was through in a jiffy. Then he discovered that he was in the main cellar of the house. Beyond him, he saw where the starlight shone in through an opening, and he darted toward it.

It led to the outer air—to the grounds around Cliff Castle. There, for a second or two, he paused.

What way had Zel gone? He decided quickly. Her most natural course would be to go for the little launch on the river.

Nick quickly calculated the time that he had spent in following her. He did not think it could be more than ten minutes.

"If Patsy has delayed her two or three minutes, I will be in time," he thought, and he bounded away through the night.

He did not know the exact location of the launch, but his natural sagacity and his wonderful power of reasoning served him well.

Since entering the house, the clouds which had obscured the sky earlier in the night had disappeared. Starlight now rendered objects fairly visible.

As Nick ran, he studied the topography of the ground in advance of him, calculating the most likely place for the launch to be moored.

Once, he turned a little to the right, and it was unfortunate that he did so.

On he bounded, hastening with all his speed. He could see the water of the river glimmering below him.

Down a steep slope he ran with all the speed that he could master. He reached the river.

There was no launch there, and no sign of Patsy.

For a second only, he paused and listened.

He heard a loud cry. It was Patsy's voice.

"Help! Help! Help!" shouted the boy.

Then came the faint ripple of Zel's musical laugh, and all was still.

"She has proved too much for the boy," thought Nick. "Oh, that Chick had been there."

Suddenly he came in sight of the launch.

It was just moving away from its moorings, but with every second gaining in speed.

He dashed down the slope, and reached the water's edge when the launch was about a hundred feet from the shore.

"Halt!" he cried. "Come back, I will shoot you."

A loud laugh was his answer.

He raised his revolver to fire, but Zel was too wary to offer herself for a target.

She held something in front of her, and in the dim light Nick saw that it was Patsy.

The boy was alive and struggling, and he acted as a perfect shield for the woman.

In daylight, Nick would have fired, but in the darkness, even with his wonderful skill, the risk of hitting Patsy was too great.

"The woman has the strength as well as the heart of a fiend," muttered the detective. "She will escape in spite of all that I can do."

"Shoot her!" cried the boy.

But, even as he spoke, she lifted him still higher in the air, and then hurled him over the side of the boat into the water."

As she did so, she also dropped out of sight inside the launch, and was thus entirely protected from bullets by the steel hull.

Nick had no recourse but to dash into the river to Patsy's rescue.

## CHAPTER X.

### ZEL'S DEFIANCE.

The detective soon brought Patsy from the river, but the launch, meanwhile, had disappeared from view.

He could still hear the sound of its exhaust, and thus tell what direction the woman was taking, but that was all.

For the present, at least, she had escaped. Patsy was nearly exhausted when Nick brought him back to the bank.

"How did it all happen?" asked the detective.

"She thumped me on me head when I wasn't lookin'."

"You should have been looking."

"Begob, I was; in the wrong way, though."

"Didn't you see her?"

"Divil a see."

"You thought she was in the boat?"

"Yep. I had one pistol in me han', an' was all ready to obey orders, whin more stars than you could count in a thousand years kim out, an' I didn't know a thing more till she held me up in front av her in the boat."

"You knew, then?"

"You bet."

They returned to the castle and found Clarita and Ethel all right in the care of Chick.

Fortunately, Clarita was even better posted than Zel had been about the secrets of the strange old house. She knew all about the trapdoor in the library, which had long been an open secret to all those who lived in the house. Why it had ever been created, nobody knew. Long before, Clarita had caused it to be screwed fast, so that it would not work, but Zel evidently had thought that it might be convenient some day, and had restored it.

How useful it proved in her case has been already seen.

By Clarita's assistance, the hiding place of Peter was found, and he was liberated. But the poor fellow had already been drugged, and was a hopeless imbecile from that time.

Zel had escaped, and she had taken with her a great part of the fortune which belonged to Clarita. Some of it was in certified checks.

It will be remembered that Nick had been watching her when she was gloating over her gains in the library. He had seen the name of the bank upon the checks, and he determined to visit it in the morning, as soon as he should be again in the city.

He said nothing to the others about the discovery of package "17—A," but quietly put it in his pocket. Then, after examining the time-table, and ascertaining that they could just about catch a train for New York, he had the horses taken from the stable, and harnessed to the carriage, and they departed.

From the station, Chick was sent to notify the proper county authorities of the condition of things at Cliff Castle, while the others went on their way to the city.

On the second morning after the events just narrated, Nick and Chick were sitting in the former's study.

Patsy had been installed in Peter's place as servant.

"Chick," said the great detective, "this woman fiend defies us."

"What now?"

"Look at this."

He passed a letter to his young assistant, which read as follows:

"NICK CARTER: Between you and me, it is a case of kill or be killed. I have no penchant for the latter, so I select the former. I will kill, and I will kill you. But first I have other killing to do, for I well know that I can make you suffer more through those you love, than by injuring you directly.

"I shall first attack your wife.

"You know what a threat like that from me means. You know that I will keep my word.

"Mark me well, for I will make you suffer.

"You have managed to beat me out of all the fortune that I made at Cliff Castle, except about twenty thousand dollars, which I fortunately had in cash. Had I felt less secure, I would have had it all in cash.

"You have restored Clarita to her rights. You have used me, by permitting me to destroy three of your enemies who would have helped in the work that I now have in hand—your destruction.

"I hated you before, but for all of this I hate you more now than ever. Heretofore I have devoted my life to making money; now I will devote it to filling graves—one for your wife, one for your assistant, whom you call Chick, and one for you. Heed me, because I have sworn it. There are so many ways in which I can do it.

"Search for me—you cannot find me; dodge me—you cannot escape me; watch over your wife, she will become my victim.

"When I get you into my power, I will first torture and then kill you. I will put out your eyes; I will cut off your ears; I will brand you with hot irons; and then, by degrees, I will let you die.

"Oh, how I glory in the anticipation of it all.

"Beware of ZEL."

"Whew!" exclaimed Chick.

"What do you think of it?"

"Pleasant prospects."

"Very."

"She beats 'em all."

"Rather. We must find her, Chick."

"Easier said than done."

"Yes, but it can be done."

"I hope so."

"She is extraordinarily acute."

"Yes."

"And she will exercise all her ingenuity to outwit us."

"Sure!"

"Therefore she will take the simplest way."

"Probably."

"Again, she means what she says here."

"Without doubt."

"What do you gather from that?"

"Not much."

"One fact at least."

"What is that?"

"She is in hiding now, within a stone's throw of where we are sitting."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've got an idea."

"What is it?"

"Let's wait for her to make a move, and then checkmate her."

"No."

"You don't like that?"

"Not at all."

"What then?"

"We must find her."

"I'm ready."

"There is a boarding house across the street."

"Yes."

"She may be there."

"By Jove!"

"It would be like her."

"It would."

"She will disguise herself as an old woman, or——"

"Or a man, eh?"

"A good thought, Chick; I would not wonder if she did that very thing."

"Well?"

"Get on your togs, and do the hotels; I will attend to the boarding houses near by."

Without another word, Chick went into the wardrobe room, and twenty minutes later he left the house, dressed as a young man about town, with plenty of money in his pockets, and time on his hands.

Soon afterward, Nick also went out, but he left the premises through the other street. His disguise was that of the Irishman, which he had worn for a short time while at Cliff Castle.

Presently Nick rang the basement bell of the boarding house to which he had referred in his conversation with Chick.

The cook came to the door.

Nick knew her name, having learned it from his own servants some time before, and, by good luck, he knew also from what part of Ireland she had come.

"Is this Biddy McSorley, at all—at all?" he asked, when she opened the iron grating.

"That's me name, sure," she replied; "an' who are you, I wanter know?"

"Oi'm Tim Flagherty, begob."

"Tim Flagherty, is it?"

"That same, Biddy."

"Go long wid yez! Sure, I don't know any Tim Flagherty."

"Well, by the same token, Biddy, I kim from the same place in the ould counthry that you did, so Oi did, an' yer brother Moike—do ye moind, Moike?"

"Sure Oi moind me own flish an' blood."

"Will, Moike sez to me, sez he, Tim, begob Oi have a swate sister foreninst the wather; an', Biddy, he bade me look fur you whin Oi landed, an' tell ye the news, an——"

"Come in, Tim; don't be afther standin' there talkin' family saycrets. Whin did ye come, sure?"

"Oi landed lasht noight, begob."

"An' how did ye foind me?"

"Oi axed. Sure, it's a swate face ye have, Biddy, an' by the same token, divil a boite to ate have Oi had sence Oi left the bo-at."

"Arrah, arrah! Sure, an' are yez hungry, Tim?"

"Oi am, Biddy."

"What will yez ate, Tim?"

"Whatever yez have handy loike, Biddy."

"Some poy, Tim?"

"I will, Biddy."

"An' some coffee, Tim?"

"God bless ye, Biddy. It's a dear friend to the hungry man yez are, sure! Faith, but that's foine! Jest kape yer oye on me whoile Oi ate, 'r begob Oi'll swalley the plate, too, so Oi will."

"Niver moind the plate, Tim."

"Oi won't, Biddy."

## CHAPTER XI.

### QUICK WORK.

"Biddy, Oi had an adventure."

"Yez did?"

"Oi did."

"Phwat was it, sure?"

"Wid a stranger."

"Indade!"

"Yes, an' the stranger came to this house."

"The new boorder, mebby."

"That same."

"Bad cess to him, Tim."

"Amen, Biddy."

"Whin did he come here to boord, sure?"

"Yisterday."

"Mebby 'tain't the same, Biddy."

"Was he young?"

"He was."

"Wid a little hair on his upper lips, sure, loike wan o' thim judes?"

"That same."

"Begorra, it must be him, Tim."

"There's wan way Oi kin till, Biddy."

"How, Tim?"

"Have yez heard him laugh?"

"Sure. Oi have that same. Whin anything goes wrong, he laughs, an' by the powers, wan feels as though a snake or a worrum was crawlin' down wan's back."

"That's him, Biddy. Is he in?"

"Oi'll ax Mary."

"Who's Mary?"

"The oopstairs girrul."

"Ax her."

Biddy soon returned with the information that the new boarder was in his room.

"Thin Oi'll go oop," said Nick.

"Yez can't, Tim."

"Why, Biddy?"

"Oi'd lose me place."

"Whisht, Biddy. Sure he promised me ten dollars av Oi'd kim an' see him wid an answer to the note he guv me. Oi have the answer in me pocket, an' half av the tin dollars is yourn, Biddy."

"Don't let anybody see ye goin' oop, Tim."

"Trust me, Biddy. Which room is it, sure?"

"Top flure, front."

"All right, Biddy. Oi'll tell ye about Moike whin Oi come down wid the coin."

Then Nick hurried up the stairs.

He reached the top floor, and going directly to the door of the front room attempted to throw it open.

It was locked.

With one push he burst it from its fastenings, and stepped into the room.

There was a person there, and one glance satisfied him that it was Zel.

She was attired in the costume of a man, but her face was not disguised.

Believing herself free from interruption she had laid aside the false mustache and her coat.

When the detective first tried the door she was sitting in her shirt sleeves, smoking a cigarette.

When he burst it open she leaped to her feet, and as he entered she quickly placed a small bulb, covered with tinfoil, between her teeth, and held it there.

She knew instinctively who was breaking into her room.

"Good morning, Zel," said Nick, in his natural voice. "We meet again."

She only smiled, still holding the bulb between her teeth.

"What have you there?" asked Nick, catching sight of it.

"Poison," she managed to articulate without lessening her hold upon the bulb with her pearly teeth. "If you come one step nearer I will swallow it."

"Do so. I am not here to make terms, but to take you from this room, dead or alive."

"Then it shall be dead."

"So be it!"

As Nick spoke he stepped forward, having taken a pair of handcuffs from his pocket.

Instantly Zel bit the bulb in half, and swallowed it.

Then she fell back into the chair behind her.

Her head sank forward, and Nick thought that she would fall to the floor.

But instead she opened her eyes, and straightened up.

Then she laughed, the same merry but chilling laugh that he knew so well.

"The poison doesn't work, does it, Zel?" asked Nick.

"It will."

"When?"

"In five minutes I will be a corpse, and you will be cheated of your revenge."

"Do you mean it, Zel?"

"I do."

"The poison will kill you in five minutes?"

"Yes."

"Have you anything to confess before you die?"

"No."

"Nor to say?"

"Yes, much."

"Speak, then."

"I am dying."

"So you said."

"Living, I hate you and yours."

"I don't doubt it."

"Dead I will haunt you."

"Bah!"

"I will."

"I taught you to believe in ghosts, Zel."

"You taught me?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I was the ghost of Burton."

"You!"

"Yes, I."

"Nick Carter, is that the truth?"

"It is."

"You never lie?"

"Never."

"Then I did not see Burton's spirit?"

"No. You saw me."

"Why didn't my bullets kill you?"

Nick explained.

"You have done me a favor," she said, when he finished.

"How?"

"I thought it was Burton's ghost."

"You were deceived."

"You will not be."

"Nonsense, Zel."

"I repeat: I will haunt you."

"If you can."

"I can and will."

"Try it."

"Listen."

"I am listening."

"Living, I would have followed you to the grave."

"Perhaps."

"I would have carried out every threat named in my letter."

"Perhaps."

"Dead, I will do it also."

"You would if you could, I do not doubt."

"I can and will."

"Oh, all right. I'll look for your ghost."

"You will see it."

"Four minutes have gone, Zel; I am waiting to see you die."

"The poison has begun to do its work. In a minute I will be dead. Remember what I have said to you."

"I will remember."

Her face flushed red, and then ashen pale.

For a moment she closed her eyes. Then she opened them again and looked up into Nick's face, and laughed.

That was the last effort, for with the laugh frozen on her face she toppled from her chair to the floor.

Nick remembered a trick that Doctor Quartz had once played in order to escape from prison, and he determined that Zel should not outwit him in the same way.

From the moment that Zel died until she was consigned to the grave and covered over with six feet of earth, Nick had her body watched.

He himself saw it placed in the coffin; he saw the lid screwed down. He saw the pine box which incased the coffin put on and fastened.

More, he followed it to the grave, and saw it buried, and he lingered there until the grave was filled.

Even then he did not relax his vigilance, for he knew the potency of the drugs which she had learned how to use of Doctor Quartz, and he knew the skill with which she used them.

For seven days he caused the grave to be watched, and then, satisfied that she was, indeed, dead, he abandoned his suspicions.

* * * * * * *

"Package 17—A" was found to contain a history of the Downing family, as well as the mystic ring which Clarita's father had given her.

The history included that of the mothers of Clarita Downing and Isabel Danton, and revealed the secret of the family feud which had brought about so much trouble.

Long years before, the mothers of the two girls had loved the same man—Clarita's father. Strangely enough, Isabel's father had loved Clarita's mother, and not the woman he married.

Neither the father nor the mother of Isabel ever forgot their disappointment, and the time came when they confessed it to each other. Then began the series of misfortunes which culminated in the scenes of this story. Isabel was early trained to plot against Clarita, and with what success we have seen.

Zel, coming upon the scene and so strangely resembling the cousins, succeeded in making a tool of Isabel, and drugging her into partial insanity. She pretended that Isabel was dead, and worked her schemes successfully, until Nick Carter came upon the scene.

Clarita Downing was restored to all her rights and property. She sold Cliff Castle at the first opportunity, for that place filled her with horror.

Well it might.

THE END.

In most of the Nick Carter stories, the reader finds him in pursuit of one or more criminals. In the next issue of this weekly—Number 784, to be published on January 6th—he will be seen on the defensive, the object of attack of "The Thirteen," who, it will be remembered, were those friends of Doctor Quartz who were sworn to punish the detective for his activities against their former chief. The story is entitled, "A Prisoner of the Tomb; or, Nick Carter's Greatest Peril." From the first page to the last it is filled with situations so extraordinary that it must rank for many years as one of the most forceful detective stories ever written.

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## YOUTH MUST BE SERVED.

"The curse of modernity has stricken even our children," said a millionaire, of Duluth, Minnesota.

"I have just returned from Europe. One of my traveling companions was a New York lawyer. He has two little children—a boy and a girl of nine and eleven years—and these children had expressed a resolve to meet the boat, no matter at what hour it might arrive. He, however, had written that they were on no account to do so.

"But when we disembarked at midnight, at Hoboken, there were the man's two children, waiting. As they flung themselves into his arms, he said:

"'But didn't I tell you——'

"The boy, however, tugged at his hand, and said:

"'Oh, papa, hurry up! There's no time to waste in scolding. The taxi's up to seventeen dollars now!'"

# His First Assignment.

### By CHARLES AGNEW MacLEAN.

**(A Two-part Story—Part I.)**

## CHAPTER I.

### THE NEW CUB

"He's waiting outside now. I told him that you weren't in, but he said that he knew better, and that you would see him as soon as you read this letter."

The office boy, whose duty it was to keep undesirable people out of the editorial rooms of the New York *Universe,* threw the note on the city editor's desk, and smiled knowingly as the city editor read it.

He had a pretty good idea that the young man who had handed him the note was looking for a position as a reporter on the *Universe.* He had also a pretty good idea of the sort of reception he would receive from the city editor.

Both these ideas happened to be correct. The city editor muttered under his breath after he had read the letter, and tossed it over to his assistant, a pale young man who presided at a desk at his side, piled high with newspapers and clippings.

"Another young cub that I'm expected to lick into a newspaper man," he growled. "They must think that I'm running a kindergarten instead of a newspaper. What shall I do with this fellow?"

"Tell him that we have all the men we need."

"That won't do. That letter comes from a man who has given me a good many big stories, and who could do me a good deal of harm if he wanted to. I want to keep on the right side of him, and this fellow—what's his name?"

"William Andrews, seventeen years old, no money, and just through school," said the assistant city editor, consulting the letter.

"William Andrews, eh? Well, probably William is the fool of the family, who is too big a chump to earn his living in an ordinary way, and so they unload him on me. I've had fellows like that sent to me before. Every one was a bigger fool than the last. They seem to think that this is some kind of a charitable institution for the education of idiotic kids."

The city editor was in an irritable humor, and he lapsed off into another half-muttered string of imprecations.

"Why don't you give him a job, and then set him to work on a hard assignment, one that will sicken him with the business before he gets through with it? Then he'll quit of his own accord," said the assistant city editor.

The city editor nodded his head approvingly.

"Show him in, Dan," he said to the office boy.

It was just a little after twelve o'clock, and the offices in the gilt dome of the Universe Building were crowded with reporters who were waiting to get their assignments for the day.

They were all watching the city editor, and many of them overheard the dialogue which had just taken place.

In consequence, there were a dozen half-smiling faces turned toward him, when Willie Andrews entered the editorial rooms and walked up to the flat-top desk where the city editor sat.

It was his first entry into a newspaper office, and the bustle and noise caused by typewriters and telegraph instruments nearly deafened him.

"I wonder what they are all grinning at," he thought, and he flushed to the roots of his hair.

The crowd of men, all much older than himself, and all staring at him, made him feel awkward and ungainly as he sat down in the chair that had been placed for him beside the city editor's desk.

"Good morning. Take a chair," said the editor abruptly. "I have read your letter, and I am going to give you a chance. I want to tell you right at the start, that it is the very hardest life a man can adopt. If I had my life to live over again, I would rather be a bootblack or a truck driver than a newspaper man."

The editor paused to see the effect of his words. The boy smiled politely, but did not speak. The editor was a little disappointed at this, for he had hoped to frighten him at the start.

"I am going to send you on your first assignment this morning," he went on, "and it is a very important one. This is your first piece of newspaper work, and I want to warn you before you start out that if you come back without a story you will lose your position. You have heard of Cornelius Kelly, the banker?"

"Yes, the well-known millionaire."

The city editor picked up a small clipping from his desk.

"A report has been printed in the official organ of the Knights of Labor," he said, "to the effect that Kelly was the cause of the last big panic in Wall Street, thereby ruining hundreds of honest men, and that he ought to be in jail for robbery. I want you to put this charge right up to him, and ask him what he has to say about it."

Two reporters seated near by, snickered audibly.

"The old man wants to get rid of him," said one; "if the kid ever talks like that to Kelly, they'll have to carry him away in an ambulance."

Willie Andrews could not catch the words, but he knew that he was being laughed at. He glanced at the city editor, who was frowning darkly. The assistant had covered his face with his hand, and was shaking as though with suppressed laughter.

The boy was inexperienced in the newspaper business, but he had plenty of good horse sense, and he knew that the city editor was making a fool of him. He knew that Cornelius Kelly was a man who always denied himself to reporters, and who could be seen only by his personal friends. He knew that the assignment he had been given was almost impossible of performance.

His first impulse was to walk out of the office without a word, but he had too much grit in him to give up his new career so readily.

He controlled himself, and looked steadily at the city editor, although his quick wits told him that everybody within earshot was laughing at him.

"You will find Mr. Kelly either aboard his steam yacht, the *Elsa,* or at his residence on Fifth Avenue," directed the editor curtly.

"Very good, sir."

Willie took the clipping from the city editor's hand, picked up his hat, and started for the door. He was mad clear through, and felt like hitting right and left at the smiling faces he saw around him.

With his face burning, and his head held high, he walked across the room, stumbling over two or three chairs, and finally reached the door.

He had come to the office that morning with high hopes of making a success as a *Universe* reporter. Now, he felt, as he went down in the elevator, that he had been beaten at the very outset.

If he had been younger, he would have burst into tears, but he was too much of a man for that. He ground his teeth together, and clenched his fists hard.

"They've sent me out on a story that I know I can't get, just to make a fool of me," he thought, "but I'll show them. I'll see that millionaire if I have to break my neck to do it, and I'll just force them to give me a place on their paper."

When he left the elevator, and went out into the crowd on Park Row, the flush had gone from his lean, brown face. His lips were set in a firm, hard line, and there was a determined expression about his eyes that made him look years older and an entirely different person from the awkward boy who had been laughed at in the newspaper office upstairs.

In the bustle and throng of the street the feeling of confusion and disappointment left him somewhat. Everybody he saw was busy and hustling, and he began to feel in his veins the throbbing energy of the great city.

He bought a morning newspaper, and boarded a Madison Avenue car going uptown. On his way up he scanned the columns of the paper.

It was his first assignment, and he looked eagerly for some reference to Cornelius Kelly. He thought that if he learned a little about the banker he might know how to approach him best.

There was nothing in the paper to help him, however, and so he started in to read the general news of the day.

The first column on the front page, the place of most honor and importance on a daily newspaper, was filled with an account of a row that had occurred the day before in a small hotel at Brighton Beach. It was a decidedly interesting story of a strange young man who had wandered into the hotel the day before and started a free fight in the barroom. The young man was evidently well able to take care of himself, for he had laid out the bartender and several others before he left. It was discovered after he had gone, that three thousand dollars had been stolen from the hotel safe.

It had been left open by the bartender, who had opened it to cash a check just before the trouble began. The story wound up by saying that there was little doubt that the young fellow who had started the fight had taken the money. Nobody had the faintest idea as to the identity of this mysterious young man, and he had made his escape so promptly that the police had very little hope of running him down.

Willie's eyes sparkled as he read the story.

"There's the kind of a story I would like to write," he thought; "a good, lively yarn like that. It would be a fine job for a fellow to find out who that young man was."

Then he thought of the discouraging outlook on his own story, and his face fell.

## CHAPTER II.

### UNDER FALSE COLORS.

The new reporter received a very chilly reception from the footman at the Fifth Avenue house of Cornelius Kelly, but managed to learn from him that the banker was aboard his yacht.

He went to the anchorage of the New York Yacht Club, at Thirty-fourth Street. There was a small fleet of white-hulled yachts there. It took Willie nearly an hour to find out that the *Elsa,* Kelly's yacht, was not among them.

He went next to the other anchorage of the club, at the foot of East Twenty-sixth Street.

There were only a few boats there—two or three small, white ones, and one great, black one with the square rig of a bark and a tangle of rigging that showed that her sails were made for use as well as ornament.

The boy in the yacht-club station on the dock at the foot of Twenty-sixth Street pointed out the big yacht as the *Elsa.*

Willie asked him how he could get out to it, and the boy shook his head.

"There are no boats here to take you," he said. "You should have sent word to your friends so that they could know when you were coming, and send ashore for you. That's the way they generally do here."

Willie was well dressed, and, moreover, was a rather nice-looking young fellow.

The boy evidently took him for a friend or relative of Cornelius Kelly. It never entered his head that a young reporter would try to get aboard the banker's private yacht to interview him.

Willie made no attempt to undeceive him. He was determined to get aboard the yacht and see the banker if he had to swim for it. He walked down to the end of the dock to see if he could find a boatman anywhere about, but there was not a rowing boat in sight, except those that hung from the davits of the yachts at the anchorage.

Then he stood on the end of the dock, and looked across the glittering water at the *Elsa.* He noticed that a boat was being lowered from the davits at the stern, and he saw several white-clothed men clambering into it. Then oars shot out from either side of the skiff, and it started over toward the dock on which he stood.

There were four men in the boat, and Willie watched them pulling hard against the tide which was running very swiftly. Nearer and nearer they came, and finally the boat brought up with a bump directly below him. The oars were shipped, and the man in the bow climbed to the dock, painter in hand.

He was a Swede, and his china-blue eyes wandered vacantly about until they fell on the figure of Willie, who was just thinking what he would say to him. Then they lit up with an expression of relief, and the Swede walked over toward Willie.

"Was you the yentleman to go aboard the *Elsa?*"

He waved his hand out in the direction of Kelly's yacht as he asked the question.

Willie did not have much time to think. In fact, he had answered in the affirmative, and started to get into the boat before he thought anything in particular. He had been set upon boarding the yacht at all hazards, and the sailor's question offered a providential chance, too good to be thrown away.

Seated on the velvet cushion in the stern of the skiff, and holding the tiller ropes, he had abundant time to think over things while the four Swedes tugged their way back to the *Elsa.*

He expected to be bundled back on shore without the slightest ceremony, but he maintained an undisturbed appearance when the skiff finally scraped alongside the black hull.

"I wonder who I'm supposed to be, and what on earth I'll say?" he muttered, as he climbed up the ladder to the deck.

He hesitated a little just before he reached the top.

"I suppose they'll spot me in a minute, and throw me overboard," he thought, "but here goes to beard the lion in his den."

He sprang to the deck, and stepped in under the awning that covered the after part of the ship. There was no lion there to beard, but instead, there was a girl, evidently about his own age, and dressed in white down to her shoes. She looked straight at him, as he stood before her, but there was not the faintest vestige of surprise on her face. On the contrary, she wore a broad smile, and advanced to Willie with both hands outstretched.

"I am so glad you have come," she said, "we were just going off without you. I saw you on the dock, and sent the boat ashore for you."

"You did, did you?" thought Willie. "I wonder who I am, anyway."

He did not say this out loud. He did not say anything at all, but grasped the small outstretched hands, and received a hearty squeeze that sent the blood tingling through his veins.

"I am Suzanne, you know," she said, "and I've been just crazy to meet you. The last time you were on the yacht I was at school. It seems a long time ago, doesn't it?"

Willie said that it did, and wondered whether he were really awake or not.

"You have heard Dick speak of me lots of times, of course."

"Of course, of course," said Willie. Then he started, for he felt the steady throb of machinery and the yacht trembling under him.

He looked toward the shore, and saw it slowly slipping past him. The yacht had started downstream.

"Why, we are moving," he said. This was a little too much for his composure, but the girl did not seem to notice anything strange in his manner.

"Yes," she said, "I told 'em to go ahead as soon as you got on board. I'm captain here now. Father will come aboard at the Crescent Athletic Club, down in Bay Ridge. Won't you sit down?"

Willie sank into one of the cushioned wickerwork armchairs which were scattered about the deck. He thought that the less he said the less likely he was to give himself away, and in spite of his bewilderment he had made up his mind to stay on the yacht until he saw Mr. Kelly, at any rate.

Suzanne sat down in a chair opposite, and looked at him. She was evidently waiting for him to speak, and he cudgeled his brain for a safe remark.

"Mr. Kelly isn't on board, then?" he finally ventured.

"Oh, dear, no. Didn't you know that he had gone down to Brighton Beach to straighten out affairs for Dick?"

Willie said that he did not, and reflected with no little satisfaction that he had told the truth once, at any rate.

"I think that we ought to know each other better," said Suzanne; "you can imagine that Dick talks about you a great deal."

Willie tried to imagine this, but gave it up as a bad job.

"If I knew who Dick was it might be easier," he thought.

"Would you mind if I called you Charlie? Mr. Davis seems rather distant for people who have heard so much about each other."

"Certainly, call me anything you like. What shall I call you?"

"Oh, call me Suzanne. I only let the reporters on the newspapers call me Miss Kelly."

"Would you make me call you Miss Kelly if I were a reporter on a newspaper?"

Suzanne shook her head.

"No, not you," she said, "but what would you be a reporter on a newspaper for? It's out of the question. I think reporters are horrible people."

"So do I," said Willie, "but I might take to something like that some time. There's no telling what may happen."

Suzanne laughed.

"What a funny boy you are," she said. "You talk as if you didn't care what happened, when Dick, your dearest friend, has just had a narrow escape from going to jail, and then you know he would lose his chance of going to West Point if it ever got in the papers. He was only a little reckless, and certainly didn't act altogether right, but people would say that he was a villain just because he happened to be the son of a millionaire, you know. And then he couldn't go to West Point. You know if it ever got into the papers that he had been mixed up in a scrape like this they would never let him in at West Point. It would just spoil his whole life. It wouldn't be so bad if it was not for the three thousand dollars. Of course Dick had nothing to do with the taking of the money. What would he want with it, anyway? He has all the money he wants. Oh, I think it's just terrible. Dick must feel awfully bad about it."

Suzanne was talking very fast and very eagerly, for she was a good deal worked up over what she was saying. Willie was sitting back in his chair looking at her with wide-opened eyes.

He was putting two and two together.

He remembered the story he had read in the paper that morning about the young man who had created such a disturbance in the hotel at Brighton Beach. All the facts of that story were stamped firmly upon his mind, and they seemed to coincide wonderfully with what the girl was saying to him.

Could it be possible that the mysterious young man was Dick Kelly, the son of the millionaire?

Willie thought a great deal in three seconds. It just took him that time to decide that the strange young man and Dick Kelly, the young millionaire, were one and the same. His heart gave a great bound, and he felt as though he were going to choke. He was new in the newspaper business, but he was sure that by accident he had run into the biggest story of the season.

He would get the story into the *Universe,* a column and a half on the front page; it would be an exclusive story, a big "beat" on all the other papers, and he would have made a name for himself as a reporter the very first day.

His eyes sparkled, and his chest swelled out as he thought how the people in the *Universe* office who had laughed at him that morning would change their minds in regard to his ability.

There would be no more laughing at him. Instead of that he would be treated with respect as the boy who had scored a "beat"—and a big one—on the very first story he had tackled. It was a pleasant prospect, and Willie gave himself up to it for a moment. In the meantime, Suzanne had stopped talking, and was gazing at him with wide-open eyes. Something in his manner had made her feel queer, and she looked at him closely. There was a folded newspaper and a writing pad sticking out of one of his pockets.

She saw this, and then she looked keenly at the young man again. Willie did not notice her change of manner at the first. He was too absorbed in his own thoughts, but when he looked at her again he thought that her face had hardened just a little, and that there was a different look in her eyes.

"I think I'll go below for a few moments," she said, arising from her chair and standing very straight. "When I come up we can have tea together on deck here."

She had disappeared before Willie could answer her, and he was left alone. It was just about sunset, and the yacht had emerged from the East River, and started down the lower bay.

Under other circumstances Willie would have thought the sail a delightful experience, but he was thinking too hard to pay much attention to what was going on around him. He drew the newspaper from his pocket, and read the story on the first column of the first page over again very carefully, making notes on his pad of writing paper that he had bought that morning when he had started life as a reporter.

He was a natural reporter, one who has a natural "nose for news," and he knew that he had a good story. He had already planned out in his mind how he was going to start the story, and the style in which he would write it, but he had not the faintest idea as to how he was to make his escape from the yacht to communicate with his paper.

Besides that, he knew that he must be a little better posted as to his facts before he wrote the story, and he determined to get all he could out of Suzanne when she came on deck again.

"Once Dick shows up on board this ship it will be overboard with me as a faker," he thought, "but by that time I will have the whole story in my head, and all the millionaires in the world can't take it away from me."

It never occurred to him that this line of conduct was not particularly scrupulous. He was too much excited over the grand chance that fate had thrust upon him to think of any one else. He was not a boy at all now. He was a clear-headed, shrewd reporter, and Suzanne and Dick meant no more to him than two puppets who might be of use to him in his business.

TO BE CONCLUDED.

## APPROPRIATE CLOTHES.

If Archie possessed one suit, he possessed a hundred. He had different suits for fishing, hunting, golfing, cricketing, walking, cycling, flying, and everything else, and so perfect was his knowledge of the clothing question that you could never surprise him in a costume that did not fit the occasion.

But gamekeepers do not pay much attention to such details, and the man who was guiding Archie over his new estate took small stock of the garb.

"Hi! There goes a rabbit!" the gamekeeper cried suddenly. "Let him have it, sir!"

Archie looked after the retreating bunny, but did not raise his gun.

"Why didn't you shoot?" asked the gamekeeper, in surprise.

"I'm sorry, but I couldn't," replied Archie mournfully. "I'm in my pheasant costume."

## THE DEVIL'S GOUGE.

By R. H. FARNHAM.

The division engineer removed his glasses, and wiped them carefully.

"No, sir," he continued, in his explanation, "I didn't dare chance it. You see, the tunnel anyway is almost too narrow and low for modern rolling stock. But this plow—I haven't the exact measurements—but I don't believe it would go through there with a three-inch clearance, top or sides—let alone the coat of ice on it."

The yardmaster nodded reflectively.

"I guess the height of her'd be all right," he said, with a respectful grin, "if it wasn't for Mr. Feeney's boiler."

The division engineer laughed, and both men walked across the snow-covered tracks to where the rotary had been sidetracked by a downbound freight. Molly, still bearing her father's dinner pail, followed.

The "rotary," technically known as a centrifugal snowplow, was of the customary pattern, except in size. It consisted of a round-roofed, boxlike iron car, terminating in front with an immense horizontal auger designed to bore a train's passage through the greatest depths of snow. Seen from in front, this auger, with the ironwork behind and inclosing it formed a solid, flat wall, extending from the rails to the height of a car. The roof above it rose still higher.

The steam for operating the drill was supplied from inside the car, and this, to accommodate the master mechanic's pet boiler, was of more than ordinary height. Because of these unusual proportions, it had been deemed best not to send the plow through the narrow, single-track tunnel three miles below.

"Brannan," said the division engineer, as they stood beside the huge, snow-crusted monster, "here's a funny idea: Suppose Devil's Gouge should cave in—we know it's done that times enough—but suppose its roof should fall again, say a mile or two from this entrance, and fill the shaft completely from floor to roof. Then suppose a train should come down the grade——" And here he entered into a scientific dissertation, with an occasional gesture at the plow, and a careful segregation of details with forefinger upon palm. Molly listened with alert, if awed, attention.

"Why, it simply couldn't help it!" concluded the speaker, throwing out his hands, with a laugh. "Impossible for anything else to happen! Well, good-by, Brannan, we'll lay out that crossover for you as soon as the snow lets up."

He strode away toward the station, glancing at his watch. Molly walked beside her father to the door of his grimy little yard office, and, leaving the lunch pail, started homeward.

Quitting the yards presently, she struck into a path across the vacant lots toward the family cottage, in a sparsely settled "railroad town." The ugly environment of coal trestles, tall chimneys, and sidetracked cars did not depress her, nor did the cheerless, ill-painted house, with its coating of grime from the yards.

If she noticed these things at all it was through the rose-tinted spectacles of enchantment. For two evenings before had not gallant, dashing Terence Kildare, engineman of the Seaboard Mail, asked her to be his wife? This very night would occur his down trip, when she might see him at the station; might stand in the crowd while he deftly "oiled round" during the one-minute stop; might catch his smile and the wave of his gauntleted hand as he swarmed back to the lofty cab. Ah, fate had indeed been kind! Brave, brawny Terence, with the love-light in his honest eyes! And to-morrow he was coming up from the end of the division to spend his "lay-over day" with her.

All the afternoon the girl's voice rang clear and happy over the household work, and her face was transfigured with a tender light. At evening, when her father returned, weary, from the yards, she met him at the door, where he yielded the frost-rimed dinner pail with a sigh of relief.

"We've got a picnic ahead of us now," he said, as he discarded the snow-beaded reefer and cap. "There's been another cave-in in Devil's Gouge."

"In the gouge again!" exclaimed Molly, in surprise. "Why, when did it happen?"

"Not two hours ago. It's a week's work, anyway, to fix it. They'll turn the rush freight and the passengers over to the Orient, here; but I don't see what'll save us from a yard blockade."

"It's too bad, father," sympathized the girl. Then a sudden light of comprehension dawned upon her.

"Why, the mail will be annulled here, won't it?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, "and everything else. But," with an assumption of great gravity, "of course, the crew'll double right back with a special."

"Father! They won't, either." Molly had detected the overdone seriousness of the tone. Brannan threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Never mind, little woman," he said, still persisting in the fiction; "them fellows, 'specially the enginemen, gets good pay; and this'll give 'em a chance for some overtime."

Molly, over the stove, tossed her chin disdainfully, and hummed a little air.

Supper over, and the dishes duly disposed of, she left her father to his pipe and the *Headlight,* and donned her coat and hat.

"Daddy, I'm going to the post office," she said, "and then—then over to Schwartz's, to try and get some squashes for Sunday."

"All right," grinned her father. "And you'd better get a roast of beef, too. Can't tell; some hobo might come in here to dinner."

Molly blushed and made a little face; but her eyes were bright with pleasure. Passing quickly up the half-lit street, she reached the business portion of the town. At the post office she got her father's mail—a printed postal-card invitation to the switchman's ball—and continued through the noise and roughness of a junction Saturday night to the little market grocery.

Here she arranged carefully for the Sunday provisions, and, coming forth, turned her steps toward the railroad station. It lacked a quarter to eight. The mail was due at eight-ten. She would learn whether the train was on time, and then run in for a moment and see Kitty Mahoney's new dress.

As she approached the long, low station, the light from the telegraph office at the end streamed cheerfully out upon the snow. Advancing to the window, she tapped on the glass, and drew back into the shadow. The sash was raised promptly, and a youth two years her junior protruded a shock of black hair.

"That you, kid?" he asked, peering out above the window bars. It was Molly's cousin, the messenger boy.

"Yes, Danny," she answered; "how's the mail?"

"Ten minutes off at Richmond. Haven't heard since. But they'll be here on time, all right, 'cause the Orient's to take their passengers. Say, kid," he added proudly, "I'm running the shebang alone. Johnson's mother took sick, and he's been gone an hour."

Molly looked at him admiringly. "I didn't know you could telegraph as well as that," she said.

"Me? I'll have an office in the spring. Going up for examination next month."

Molly quickened her pace toward Kitty Mahoney's. Only ten minutes late! Terence could be trusted to make that up in thirty miles, especially, she thought, with a smile, for the chance of a visit with her.

That evening Miss Mahoney received the shortest call she could remember from her bosom friend. Even the bright new raiment could not dispel a certain flutter in the region of Molly's heart. She was soon back in the frosty air, retracing her steps to the station.

It was eight o'clock. The hour was marked plainly on the luminous orange-colored disk in a clock tower down the street. Ten minutes more! She approached the building slowly, her footsteps creaking sharply on the hard-packed snow. The platform was still empty. The wheel inspectors, porters, every available man who would be at the station at train time, had been pressed into service to prepare the work train in the yards above.

She was still some distance away, when the door of the little telegraph office was suddenly torn open, and Danny, hatless and coatless, rushed out upon the platform. He halted for a moment, bent forward, staring wildly up the track, ran a few steps, paused irresolutely, and once more turned back. Molly sped forward and seized him by the arm.

"Danny, Danny!" she cried; "what is it? What makes you look so?"

"The mail!" he panted. "We've got to stop her!"

At the confirmation of the fear she had not dared express, it seemed to the girl that the world was crumbling beneath her feet. Then instantly she was herself again—more than herself; cool and clear-headed as a general on the battlefield. She twisted a hand into Danny's vest lapel, and pushed him sharply against the wall of the building.

"Tell me what's the matter," she commanded. The boy, looking beyond her with unseeing eyes, spoke automatically:

"They broke a side rod at Valley Farm—right in front of the station; the operator heard it crash. It smashed the cab, and snapped off again, so they didn't tip over. But they didn't stop, or slow. They passed Hollywood only a minute late, with both men out on the tank, making for the train; and they've just come over the crippled bridge at Lampson's, sixty miles an hour. They can't stop—and there's the tunnel!"

He sank back against the building, repeating the last words absently, as though rehearsing a lesson. Molly shook him fiercely.

"Brace up, now, Danny, or you're no cousin of mine. Where's the four hundred and ten? Get Nugent to run her out ahead of them and slow them down."

Danny shook his head.

"She's gone. Went east helping one hundred and six. Won't be back for half an hour."

"Isn't there another engine in the yard?"

Again the boy shook his head in silence.

Molly turned away, with a wild sob of despair.

"Oh, isn't there anything——" she cried, in agony; "isn't there a car—Danny! the snowplow!"

"Hurry!" she screamed, disregarding his amazement; "get a switch key and a bar."

With this mysterious ray of hope the boy's wits returned. He plunged into the telegraph office, and was back in an instant. "Here's the key," he said breathlessly; "we'll get a bar in Connolly's tool house."

With the girl in advance, they sped down the snowy yards. Danny diverged across the tracks to the tool house, while Molly continued to the side of the giant plow. Gazing up at the dim, ponderous bulk of iron, the girl was overwhelmed by a shrinking fear of consequences, a crushing sense of her own weakness. She felt an almost uncontrollable desire to leave it all and run across the fields to the warmth and safety of home. But it was only for an instant.

"Terry, my darling," she whispered, "I'm daring it for you. I'm sure I'm right," she added, in the courage of resolution formed; "I heard what the division engineer said. He ought to know."

She hurried on to the end of the siding, where she opened the switch connecting it with the main line. Speeding back, she found Danny awaiting her with the bar.

"Get ready," she said; "we must start it as soon as we hear the train." Then suddenly she halted in a new and hopeless fear.

"Can we ever do it?" she gasped.

"Sure!" answered Danny promptly. "The grade will fix it."

He sprang upon the plow and released the brake. Jumping to the ground, he inserted the starting bar behind the wheel. Molly stepped to the main track and bent forward, listening. Her ears caught the rumble of the train, far up the grade.

"Now, Danny; now!" she cried.

Danny swung down upon the bar with the full measure of his youthful strength. Springing to his side, Molly contributed her own. The great plow moved an inch, two inches, three! Clang! clang! went the bar against wheel and rail. And then, in the grip of the sharp downgrade, the great mass rolled slowly forward to the main line.

"Fix it so the engine will couple it," cried Molly faintly, "and—and shut the switch!"

Danny sprang after the receding plow, wrenched open the drawhead jaw, and leaped aside to the switch stand.

Already the rails were clicking with the approach of the train.

He drew over the switch lever, and groped for the fastening.

His hand was snapping the padlock, when suddenly the alley between the lines of cars lit up like noonday, as the electric headlight swung into range around the curve; and the gigantic "Mother Hubbard" racer, hot, black, redolent of bitument and frying oil, reeled past with the crashing roar of a tornado, its succession of darkened sleepers scurrying madly behind.

There was a wild tattoo of wheels on rail joints, a final hollow roar, a red blink of tail lights, and the Seaboard Mail was gone to meet its fate.

On board the dismantled engine two men were awaiting death. Crouched on the narrow runway between the cabs, they watched the fleeting white landscape with the numbness of half realization.

The crash of twenty miles back had come without warning. At the top of a steep grade the huge main rod, in whizzing oscillation beneath the engineman's cab, had snapped its crank pin from the driver, and whirled aloft, to the destruction of all in its path.

Staggering back from the ruin with a broken arm, Terence Kildare had tried to close the wide-open throttle; but the terrific blow had bent the valve stem immovably in its socket. The air-brake crank was likewise wrecked, and the brakes still loose—a fact which proved the entire air of the train to have failed.

The whistle rigging was gone; he could not call for the hand brakes; and the blind baggage behind precluded entry to the train. With the single hope remaining them, the engineman and fireman had failed.

They had climbed to the platform of the baggage car and attempted to cut loose and hold back the train. But the fireman, with an iron bar inserted in the brake wheel, for leverage, had in his excitement pulled too suddenly, snapping the frosty chain; and the couplings had remained intact.

By unspoken word it was agreed that neither man should jump. Together they had silently returned to the engine, and sunk upon the runaway—to wait.

One station, two, had passed, scarcely noticed. And now came a glimmer of switch lights, a vision of a crowded station platform, the tinkle of crossing bells, the rattle of wheels flung back by standing cars—and the junction was gone.

Three miles ahead was Devil's Gouge!

Kildare bowed his head upon his arm. Poor little Molly! He wondered if she knew.

Then suddenly the fireman gripped his shoulder, pointing ahead, with a half-hysterical cry. Far down the track, just within the headlight's rays, a huge, unwieldy object swayed and tossed its way down the grade before them.

Kildare gazed at it with wide, uncomprehending eyes. Then, as their approach brought it clearly into view, he cried:

"It's the rotary, Jimmy! And it's on the main track."

The ponderous locomotive swept down upon the flying plow like a hawk upon a sparrow, and struck it with a stunning shock. But the plow's momentum saved it from derailment, and the couplers snapped shut, holding it firmly to the engine.

There was a long, reverberant roar, and the mellow winter starlight disappeared as if snuffed out. The train was in Devil's Gouge!

The two men sank back again in silence. The filmy anthracite smoke swept down upon them in choking clouds. Through the doorway the red gauge lamp cast its quivering light on the shattered cab; and forward the headlight's glare fell against the snow-frescoed end of the plow in mocking brightness. But beyond everything was black.

Suddenly the engineman turned upon his companion with wild, questioning eyes. The rattle of the wheels on the rail ends was becoming slower! Was it only a merciful delusion to cheat the parting soul? No; for the fireman heard it, too.

The speed of the train was decreasing!

"What's doing it?" gasped Kildare half deliriously. "Look!"

Already they were moving less than twenty miles an hour. From this the momentum declined sharply, as under an emergency brake. Then there came deafening explosions, as the cylinders on both sides blew out; and, rebounding as from collision with an India-rubber wall, the train stood still.

Less than half an hour afterward the wrecker from the junction coupled into the rear sleeper, and drew the train to the open air. It had barely stopped, when a disheveled little maiden sprang from the caboose steps and pushed through the crowd to the baggage car, where Engineman Kildare sat waiting for the surgeon.

"Terry; oh, Terry!" she cried, and fainted on his breast.

"There, my little one," he said, when, on the cushioned locker, she again opened her eyes. "Nobody's hurt. Thanks to Providence, a miracle has saved us all this night."

"It was a miracle," said Molly, with a shaking laugh; "but Danny and I let out the plow."

The wondering assemblage drew closer.

"Tell us about it, please," said the trainmaster kindly.

"Why, you see," explained Molly, "the division engineer told my father it would happen under the right conditions, and all of the conditions came out to-night. He said that the plow and tunnel were of almost exactly the same size, and that if the plow came in there on a fast train when there was this kind of a cave-in, it would form an air cushion that would stop the train."

There was a moment of absolute silence. Then the air was riven by a deafening tumult of cheers. Passengers, trainmen, wreckers who only half understood, crowded forward in wild congratulation. But Molly hid her face on Terence's shoulder.

"Tell them I don't deserve it," she whispered; "I did it all for you!"

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### THE BIGGEST ANIMAL.

There was once a time when the temperature of the whole earth was far hotter than it is now, and tropical plants flourished even in the polar regions, now covered with ice and snow.

Long before there were human beings in the world, before even the mammoth or mastodon appeared, the principal forms of animal life were fishes. Then came huge creatures, between fishes and reptiles, somewhat resembling lizards in structure, and called saurians, from the Greek word for a lizard.

The most gigantic of these strange inhabitants of the sea was the Ichthyosaurus, or fish-lizard. It had the body of a fish, with a long tail, having a fin below, and enormous jaws, like those of a crocodile, armed with rows of strong teeth; but it was most remarkable for its immense eyes, which were larger than those of any other animal that ever existed. This tyrant of the deep was about thirty feet in length, and his voracity was so great that even the Plesiosaurus, a monster with a neck like a serpent, was devoured by him, as we know from the fragments discovered in the fossil remains of the stomach of the Ichthyosaurus. For the red sandstone has preserved everything. Though now so hard, it was once the soft sand of the sea beach, and on it we can trace the footprints of the animals that walked over it, and even the raindrops that fell on it in the days when the Old World was young.

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# Fighting in Buckskin;

## Or, GUARDING THE BORDER.

By T. C. HARBAUGH.

### SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

At a ball given by Lord Fairfax, in Winchester, Virginia, during the French and Indian War, Captain Lee, of the Young Guardsmen, sees a stranger who is watching his movements. Subsequently he learns that the man is known as Jacques Blanc, but that he really is the Count De Tonales, a brother of Madame Pompadour, the favorite of the French king. Tonales assaults Lee outside a tavern, and makes off. An older officer tells Lee that Tonales, acting as confidential agent of the French king, has obtained such influence over the Indians that they will rise against the English colonists whenever he gives the word. A few days later, Amy Randolph, a member of a distinguished family, is kidnaped by Running Water, an Indian, who takes her into the wilderness, where she is confronted by Tonales. Tonales is in love with her, and Amy defies him.

Dick Parsons, the French spy, sees Jacques Blanc, the agent of the French king, hide a letter in a tree, addressed to the English. Dick takes the letter. Dabney, a renegade with the French forces, steals the letter from Dick. Captain Lee receives from an Indian a chart giving directions for finding Amy Randolph, who has been abducted by Indians. Lee, with Vernon and Nimble Ned, start out to find Amy. Nimble Ned captures a supposed Indian, whom he finds is really Dick Parsons. He induces Parsons, in exchange for his liberty, to reveal the fact that Amy is held prisoner in the Indian camp under the direct orders of Jacques Blanc. Lee, Ned, and Vernon then hasten to the Indian camp. Meantime, in the Indian camp, Starbeam, a young squaw, saves Amy from death at the hands of an angry mob of squaws, by stealing the sacred wampum and showing it to the squaws. Jacques then attempts to carry Amy off, but Starbeam again saves the white girl and gets her safely back to a tepee. Starbeam knows that the penalty for touching the sacred wampum is death. She meets Lee, who induces her to abandon the idea of suicide. Starbeam then, under cover of night, leads Lee to the tepee of Anato, the old medicine man, where the sacred wampum is kept, and where Amy is sleeping. Lee takes Amy and Starbeam to Fort Royal. There Parsons informs Lee and Ned that on the morrow the fort is to be attacked by the allied Indian tribes commanded by Black Heron and Dabney. The allies send messengers demanding the surrender of the fort. Lee returns a defiant answer.

### CHAPTER XV.

#### THE SPY INSIDE.

It was Achille Dabney who wrote the demand for surrender. He also received the defiance, and gave it to Black Heron, whose warriors thereupon raised the wild cries that announced to those in the fort that no quarter would be given.

But Achille Dabney had another scheme. All knew that the fort was well protected, that an assault would not take it. Therefore he made a proposition so bold and daring that even the Indians shook their heads. It was that he should disguise himself as a friendly Indian, enter the fort, and some night open the main gate.

More than once this scheme had been successful in border warfare, and the renegade hoped that again it might prove effective.

Achille was built like an Indian, and his long association with the tribes had rendered him familiar with the different languages.

Black Heron gave his consent, and the renegade set out to prepare for his work.

The night after the refusal to surrender the fort an Indian, or one supposed to be such, appeared at one of the gates and secured the attention of the guard. He wanted to enter.

The guard, suspicious, would not comply with his request until he had sent for Captain Lee, who questioned the one outside for a time and at last gave orders for the gate to open.

In came a tall warrior wearing the insignia of the Hurons, some of whom, since the fall of Duquesne, had taken sides with the English.

Showing the newcomer all the courtesy he could, Lee conducted him to his quarters, where he put him under a strict examination by which he learned a good deal concerning the besieging force, and then gave him the freedom of the fort.

Having thus effected an entrance, Dabney made his way to a spot where a few other Indians were, and mingled with them on terms of intimacy.

Wildfire, as he called himself, let nothing escape him; he talked freely with the provincials and the Indians. The next day, with his eyes open, he made the rounds. He told stories that fascinated groups of listeners, and the day passed without his being suspected.

But there were keen eyes, nevertheless, within the stockades. For some time the renegade had a listener who followed him from place to place. This was Jumping Bear, the Delaware.

At last Achille told a wonderful story of a bear hunt. Jumping Bear had once before heard that story, and from the lips of Dabney himself.

The Indians do not tell the tales of others; they tell only their own; they tell only those whose truth they can vouch for, and woe to the red hunter who attempts to palm off on a listening group a narrative which is not original.

It was this bear story that startled the listening Indian boy.

Jumping Bear rose, and walked away. A few rods from the fire, he ran into Nimble Ned, and the next moment his hand had encircled the youth's wrist.

"Brother," said Jumping Bear, "there is a painted liar in the fort."

"What's that?" cried Ned. "Some one here that lies? Well, that's not very strange, seeing that we have all sorts of men here, and you can't expect all of them to tell the truth."

"But this is a red liar," persisted the Delaware. "Jumping Bear has just listened to him——"

"Where is he, then?"

The young Indian led Nimble Ned as close to the fire as he dared go, and halted. Then he pointed out Achille Dabney.

"Why, that's the new recruit—Wildfire, the Huron," exclaimed Ned. "Doubtless he's been spinning yarns to get into the good graces of the other braves."

"But he tells one story which Jumping Bear has heard before."

"That may be; you know the Hurons are great story-tellers."

"But no one tells that story but Achille Dabney, the white renegade."

"What's that?" cried Nimble Ned, with a start.

"It is true. Jumping Bear heard him tell it in the forest many moons ago, and now he tells it in the same words."

"That's queer. He might have told his tale to Wildfire."

"The Indian does his own boasting and no one else does it for him."

"I see."

Interested now, Nimble Ned watched the figure of the renegade at the fire. Every movement he made was the movement of an Indian, and his make-up was so good that the young private of the guards turned to Jumping Bear, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"For once you have been fooled," said he. "That is surely a Huron."

"But watch him a little longer, brother. See how he takes his pipe from his mouth."

Ned lingered. The renegade removed his pipe from between his teeth. Jumping Bear looked into Ned's face at this.

"Did you see, brother?" he asked.

Nimble Ned said nothing.

"Did he handle the pipe as the Indian does?"

"Not quite."

"Now look at his shoulders," said Jumping Bear. "Are they not the shoulders of a white man?"

Ned leaned forward in his eagerness.

"You are right, Jumping Bear!" he cried. "That man is not an Indian."

"He is Achille, the renegade."

"If I thought so——"

"The bear story convicts him," answered Jumping Bear. "It was never told by any one but the white Indian."

The two friends drew off. Achille continued to sit by the fire until the last redskin had told his story, when all prepared for sleep.

The Indians rolled themselves in their blankets, and, placing their feet at the fire, assumed attitudes of repose, and in a short time silence reigned. Achille followed the example of the warriors.

The famous bear killer of the Hurons seemed buried in the deepest slumber, but two pairs of keen eyes were upon him.

Ned and Jumping Bear had come back to their watch, and, concealed by the corner of one of the huts, watched Dabney.

Hours passed. At last one of the sleepers moved. It was the one they had watched so long and well.

Achille Dabney sat up and looked cautiously around. The fire was smoldering; the last embers were about to lose their faint light, but enough remained to tell the young spies that Wildfire, the Huron, was not asleep.

For ten minutes the sitting figure of the renegade remained in its position, and then he rose to his feet.

Stepping lightly over the forms about the fire, he glided toward the west stockade, where he halted and leaned against the stout stakes.

Ned and his companion saw it all. Dabney remained in that position for some time, when the boys heard what appeared to be a scratching on the outside. It was faint but distinct, and the renegade, with his ear glued to the posts, heard it as well. All at once, drawing something from his bosom, the renegade threw it over the stakes, and then listened again.

All doubts were now removed in the minds of the boys. They knew that a spy was inside the fort, and that the whole garrison was in deadly danger.

Dabney drew back and slipped away, with the watchers still at his heels. He had communicated with some one on the outside of the fort, and that person had doubtless carried the message to either Jacques Blanc or Black Heron.

Back to the fire slipped the renegade. The spies saw him roll himself again in his blanket and slide between two warriors on the ground.

"What says my brother now?" asked Jumping Bear, as he looked into Ned's face.

"The spy is at work," was the reply.

"And what will my brother do?"

"We will denounce him to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" cried Jumping Bear. "Will not to-morrow be too late?"

"No. He is asleep now. The message he threw over the stockade will fall into the hands of Black Heron. But that chief will do nothing to-night. Achille merely told him the number of our garrison, and how we are situated. He will not attempt to escape to-night, for he thinks he has not been discovered."

"Just as my brother wills," answered Jumping Bear. "But Wildfire is liable to play another hand before daylight."

Nimble Ned thought not, yet he concluded it would be best to post Captain Lee. Telling Jumping Bear that he would do this, he went to Lee's quarters and rapped loudly. Lee was not in his quarters, and he turned away.

"Morning, then," he said to himself. "We will unmask this spy in the morning."

Nimble Ned went back to the vicinity of the fire.

The last ember had burned out and the spot was now wrapped in darkness. Ned looked at the forms discernible under the stars and counted them before he moved away.

Dabney was still there.

"He's safe till daylight," said Lee's young friend.

Nimble Ned drew off and sought his own cot. It would not be long till morning. He would have a nap, anyhow, and, with this thought in view, he threw himself upon the straw.

How long he slept he did not know. All at once he found himself sitting bolt upright, staring into the darkness ahead. Something like a vise was at his arm; he drew back and felt for his pistol.

"Quick, brother!" said a voice at his ear. "Quick! The little gate is being opened."

Ned was on his feet in an instant. With a cry he bolted from the place, and, with Jumping Bear, bounded across the drill grounds.

Suddenly he heard noises that horrified him.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### UNMASKING A TRAITOR.

Never was a red army commanded by a better leader than Black Heron, the Mohawk.

Those who were marshaled under his totem knew that he feared nothing.

But he was arbitrary. He would let none give him advice. There had never been the best of feeling between Black Heron and Jacques Blanc, the king's agent.

The chief had, on several occasions, resented advice which the Frenchman had proffered, and had told him plainly that when he wanted advice from him he would seek it, and not before.

The Mohawk leader had assumed command of the forces employed for the reduction of Fort Royal. He had placed his men where he thought best and had consented to Dabney's plan.

When, on the night of the adventures of Jumping Bear and Nimble Ned within the fort, Jacques Blanc came to Black Heron, he found the chief in ill humor.

The count had promised Captain Cross, the English agent, to betray the chiefs of the allied tribes into British hands for a certain sum of money to be paid for his treachery.

Black Heron, while compelled to obey the traitor because he bore messages from France, he hated him with all his heart. When he saw the agent of the king standing before him, Black Heron looked up with a stern countenance.

"How long are we to remain here without attacking the fort?" Jacques exclaimed. "Does my master, the king, pay you for sitting still while the English yonder prepare for us?"

Slowly the gaze of the Mohawk chieftain turned upon the Frenchman.

"Black Heron leads the warriors," he said haughtily.

"I know that, but what shall I write on the talking papers to my king?"

"Whatever Dark Hand pleases," was the reply.

"But the king will not be satisfied. He will say: 'What sort of children have I in the forests of the New World, that they gather round the enemy's fort and then sit down and tell stories of the hunt?' Is this the way we are to take the fort from the enemy?"

Black Heron sat still a moment longer, and then he rose slowly to his feet.

As his figure straightened, he looked like a giant.

"What is my brother that he dares talk thus to Black Heron, the Mohawk?" he cried. "What is he that he tells Black Heron what to do with his warriors? He is but a paleface—one who roams the forest like the wolverine, sneaking from trap to trap and taking the catch. He can go back to France and tell the king, my brother, that Black Heron is carrying on the war to suit himself."

"But you promised, chief——"

"Black Heron keeps all his promises," was the quick interruption. "He fights for the king of France, and he does not listen to the commands of the white agent."

They stood face to face.

"What will white brother do?" repeated the Indian.

"You shall see," the Frenchman said. "Interfere with my affairs, and you will regret it."

Jacques turned, but the hand of the Mohawk held him back.

"Brother, let Black Heron speak. He has had certain words in his heart for some time, and now he will let them out."

"Proceed. You might as well say them here as elsewhere."

"Then let the agent of the king, my brother, know that Black Heron believes that he is playing double."

The count did not reply. He merely looked into the stern face of the Indian and waited for him to proceed.

"What sort of talking papers does my brother hide in hollow trees?" continued the chieftain. "Why does he hide them there if he is not talking to the enemy—to the English?"

"It is false!" cried Jacques. "I hide nothing in the trees that I am ashamed of."

"Does my brother say he does not hide papers in the trees? Is his tongue so forked that he looks Black Heron in the face and says this? Does he not tie his talking papers with deerskin and leave them in the trees for a bearded Englishman?"

"I know no such person."

"Does my brother who serves the king say he never saw Captain Cross, who is the British agent? Does he look into Black Heron's eyes and say that he put nothing in the hollow trees for Captain Cross?"

"Who says I do?"

"Little Rabbit."

"Where is the liar?" cried Jacques Blanc. "Where is the person who will stand up and say that I put papers in the trees for Captain Cross?"

"Will he face Little Rabbit?" demanded Black Heron.

"Yes, yes, or any other liar!" cried Jacques.

Black Heron sounded a low cry, and an Indian came forward.

"Find Little Rabbit, the Mohawk, and bring him to Black Heron," said the chief.

The Indian bounded away, and the leader of the red allies turned again to Jacques Blanc.

"Wait, brother," said he. "You need not go till Little Rabbit comes. He will tell what he saw in the forest."

"Why should I wait for the little falsifier?" cried Jacques. "I have business elsewhere, and, besides, Black Heron must not question the doings of one who comes straight from the king across the water. He has but to obey."

Jacques fell back, but that moment footsteps were heard, and an Indian, small in stature, halted in front of Black Heron.

"Little Rabbit is here," said the Mohawk leader.

"I want nothing to do with him," exclaimed Jacques indignantly. "I am not on trial. I have no use for one who will dog the steps of another in the forest."

"But Dark Hand must listen," cried Black Heron. "He shall hear what Little Rabbit has to say."

"Not I. I am answerable only to the king of France."

"And to Black Heron, the king of the wilderness," cried the chief. "Stay, brother. You shall listen."

Jacques turned to the little Indian, who was looking at Black Heron for the command to speak.

"What did Little Rabbit see in the forest?" asked Black Heron. "Did he see Dark Hand hide anything in the hollow trees?"

"Little Rabbit saw him put talking papers there," was the reply. "He hide them in the oak by the river, opposite the little island. Little Rabbit watch from the bank, and when he hide the talking paper, he look all around and sneak away."

"And you say you saw this?" cried Jacques. "Have you been dogging the footsteps of the king's agent?"

"Little Rabbit was not trailing Dark Hand. Dark Hand merely came across his path, and the eyes of the Rabbit are always open."

"And I suppose you came at once with your tale to your master?"

"Little Rabbit brought a talking paper to Black Heron."

Jacques started and lost color.

"So you stole what you saw put in the tree?" he cried, as he looked savagely at the spy. "You carried off that which did not belong to you?"

"The Rabbit wanted Black Heron to know what Dark Hand hides in the tree."

"What if I did hide a talking paper in the tree?" the count said. "Have I not a right to do so? Am I not the agent of our brother, the king, across the water? and must I have my papers stolen by every young warrior who roams the forest? I must reach some of our friends through the talking papers."

Black Heron was not to be deceived thus.

"But why does Dark Hand talk to Captain Cross, the Englishman?" he demanded. "Why does he leave talking papers in the hollow trees for the agent of the British king?"

"I—I——"

"Let not the tongue of Dark Hand lie when his heart prompts him to tell the truth. The talking paper which Little Rabbit found in the tree was for Captain Cross, and one of the white Indians read it for the Mohawk."

"He read it, eh? Does my brother, Black Heron, believe that I would betray the red men into the hands of the British?"

"Why did the talking paper remind Captain Cross of the heap of money which he is to pay when Black Heron, Samosett, and other chiefs are delivered to the long knives?"

It was out at last.

Jacques Blanc tried to keep his composure.

He looked first at Little Rabbit and then into the eyes of the great Mohawk.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed suddenly. "It was a good trick which Little Rabbit discovered. I was only trying to see how far this Captain Cross would carry one of his propositions. What! me betray my brother, Black Heron, and the other chiefs? Did King Louis send me across the waters for this? So the talking paper which would have caught Captain Cross fooled Black Heron, the Mohawk. Ha! ha! ha!"

But the laugh did not dissipate the sternness that had settled upon the Indian's countenance.

"It's a good joke, by my soul," cried Jacques. "I'll see you in the morning," and he turned away.

"Dark Hand must not go," was the answer. "He is under arrest and he is answerable from this moment, not to our brother, the king, but to Black Heron, the king's chief!"

A shiver shot through the Frenchman. He knew what those words signified.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### OVER THE STOCKADE.

It was true, as Jumping Bear had informed Nimble Ned. The "little gate" was being opened.

For a few seconds the two boys stood in the dark, at the gate, and listened.

No one was forcing the portal at the time; but when they examined it, they found that the strong iron bars had been withdrawn, and that it would take but a push to throw it open.

This would give entrance to the enemy without.

Dabney was lying at the dead fire, apparently asleep, and if any one had noticed him they would have concluded that the white Indian was the best sleeper of all.

Nimble Ned flew to the bars which had been thrown aside, and began to replace them. He was not a moment too soon, for there were footsteps beyond the stockade, and low voices.

"Quick! they have come!" cried Jumping Bear.

Suddenly some one tried to open the gate; but, thanks to the bars, it did not move.

"Just in time," said Ned.

The boys drew back a pace, and then heard the voices of Indians.

"The guards, quick!" exclaimed Ned, and he raised his voice in a shout.

"The foe! the foe!" he cried. "The Indians are at the gate!"

There was instant response to his cry. Twenty guards rushed to the scene.

"The foe is out there," said Nimble Ned, pointing at the gate," and the traitor is in the fort."

"In the fort, say you?" cried Lieutenant Mason, who had heard the cry and rushed out.

"Back yonder," said Ned, pointing to the fire. "He came in as an Indian, and has opened the gate to the foe."

There was a shout of vengeance from the provincials, and some turned away.

"Will you show us the traitor?" said Mason. "Some one rouse Captain Lee. Ah, he is here."

Lee soon appeared on the scene and took command.

"The foe was at the gate, which was unbarred," said Mason. "But for Ned and Jumping Bear, we should have had the red horde upon us. The traitor is inside, they say——"

"Where is he, Ned?"

"Come," cried Master Ned Halpine, as he darted away, followed by the men. "The last I saw of him he was playing Indian, sleeping with the Indians at the fire."

The spot was soon reached, and Ned paused to look at Captain Lee in a bewildered way.

"What is it, Ned?"

"He is gone! The rascal has vanished!"

"No white Injun here," said Jumping Bear. "Him slip away."

"Who was he?"

"Achille Dabney."

"What! that villain in the fort?" cried a voice, at sound of which all turned.

The speaker was Dick Parsons, the new recruit, and his face was white.

"Achille came into the fort," said Ned. "He came to open the gates and let in the foe."

"See that every part of the stockade is watched," commanded Lee. "He may be in the fort yet, and if we find him——"

"It is too late, I fear, cap'n," Ned answered. "He doubtless heard the confusion, and by this time is back among his friends."

"But search the fort for him. It will do no harm."

Lights blazed everywhere and the baffled Indians in the forest greeted this with wild cries.

The young ladies had been aroused from sleep by the noise. Amy Randolph came out, followed by her friends. Near by stood Starbeam.

Dabney, meantime, seemed to be measuring the distance between him and the stockade. Like a deer he bounded forward, reached the stockade, and began pulling himself up.

Ah, he was safe! In a second he would have Fort Royal and death behind him.

"There he is!" cried out a voice.

Dabney was between two of the pointed stakes, when his belt caught on a sharp splinter.

Again and again he tried to free himself, but the splinter held him a prisoner.

"Quick!" cried some one. "He will get away. Fire!"

A volley was fired, killing the renegade.

An Indian found the quivering body impaled on the stake, and dragged it down.

Five minutes later, a number of friendly Indians stood around the body of Achille Dabney, the renegade.

Catching it by the head and feet, two of the strongest swayed it to and fro till the right momentum was obtained, and then the body shot up into the air and disappeared on the other side of the pointed stakes.

There was no more sleep that night in Fort Royal. The young women remained up and discussed the events of the last few hours. Captain Lee looked after the defenses of the place. All realized that something dreadful overshadowed the little garrison, and that the death of Achille Dabney was not the end of the chapter.

With the break of day all looked through the loopholes into the forest beyond. No Indians were in sight.

In the middle of the afternoon, however, a wild yell was heard in the forest.

Instantly, Lee and a score of the garrison soldiers peered over the stockade. They saw a body of Indians in their war paint filing through the forest.

"More," said Lee, as he gazed. "Will they never cease adding to their number?"

The forest now rang with cries of every description.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### CHICK, THE ROBIN.

Indians appeared everywhere. Now and then a shot could be heard. Bullets struck the stockade, but no damage was done. All seemed to be waiting for night. Slowly the day fled and the first shadows of the dreaded hour came.

Captain Lee walked impatiently across the drill ground, issuing his orders.

"What is it?" he asked, as Vernon halted beside him.

"An Indian wants to come in."

"Surely not at this time."

"He is at the little gate."

"Let him stay there," and Lee's brow darkened. "Think of the precious lives committed to our care."

"He says he is a Delaware."

"Delaware or Mohawk, all must be alike to us at this time."

Vernon lingered.

"One moment, Vernon," said Lee. "At the little gate, did you say? I will go thither and see."

The young officers went to the place, and Lee put his lips close to the entrance.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Chick, the Robin."

"And who, pray, is Chick, the Robin?"

"Ask Jumping Bear."

Lee turned.

"He says that Jumping Bear will vouch for him. Where is the little Delaware?"

Vernon hastened away.

"Chick has been a long time in the forest," came in from beyond the gate. "He has news for the white chief in the fort."

"And you want the gate opened, of course—the same old trick," responded Lee.

By this time Vernon was back with Jumping Bear, and, when Lee told him that Chick, the Robin, was outside, the boy started.

"Do you know him?" asked Lee.

"Jumping Bear knows Chick, the Robin."

"Well?"

"He has not been with the Delawares for many moons. Let Jumping Bear hear his voice."

Then Lee asked the one outside a question, and, when the answer came, Jumping Bear cried:

"It is the Chick."

"Shall we let him in?"

"No, pull him over the stockade."

A rope was thrown over the stakes.

Several provincials pulled away, and presently something dark appeared at the top of the defenses.

"It is Chick, the Robin!" cried Jumping Bear. But the next instant, as a body fell at his feet, he fell back with a cry of horror.

Sure enough they had pulled Chick, the Robin into the fort, but he was dead!

A knife wound in his breast told the story.

The ruse had failed.

The Delaware youth, caught by the foe outside, had been forced to ask for the opening of the gate that half a score of savages might rush in. Finding that their game was spoiled, they had driven a knife into the boy's breast, as he mounted toward the top of the stockade on the rope.

All who gazed at the still quivering body knew what had taken place, for all understood the tactics of the Indians.

Silence fell about the little group. At last Jumping Bear, rushing to the stockade, clambered to the top, and set the woods echoing with a war whoop.

The whole garrison joined in Jumping Bear's yell of defiance.

"Talking paper," cried the young Delaware, as he came running up to Lee five minutes later.

"Where did it come from?"

"Jumping Bear find it in the Chick's scalplock."

"Then he was the bearer of a message, after all."

Lee read the message.

"What does it say?" cried Vernon.

"I dare not think it true," was the reply. "It is too startling to be credited, but——"

A wild shout came from the forest, then another and another.

"It has come!" said Kenward Mason. "The storm is about to break."

Vernon did not leave Lee's side.

"Quick!" Vernon cried. "Tell me, captain, what the message said."

"It was from Colonel Bouquet."

"Is he on the way to help us?"

"He is marching through the wilderness. But we must hold out till to-morrow night. He cannot reach Fort Royal until then."

The din outside was now deafening.

"Until to-morrow night?" Vernon said, looking at Lee. "We will hold out."

Lee looked at his young companion, and clasped his hand.

Then a volley, poured at the fort by the howling fiends outside, struck the stockade, and the provincials answered in kind from the portholes.

The assault had begun.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE AGENT IS SCALPED.

Jacques Blanc, the secret agent of King Louis, had been placed under arrest by Black Heron, but was freed by a friendly Indian.

His liberator helped him disguise himself as an Indian, and then Jacques tore after the shouting hordes and stopped only when the first volley of the attack broke upon his ears. It seemed to him that all the demons of the lower world had been let loose around Fort Royal.

He smiled grimly when he heard the shots in reply from the portholes, and then he rushed on. It did not take him long to come upon the besiegers.

He found them dancing the war dance before the fort, but at the same time trying to keep out of the way of the provincials' rifles.

Suddenly a young Indian came running back.

Almost within reach of the Frenchman's arm, he stopped for breath and looked over his shoulder.

Jacques leaned forward and eyed him closely.

"Ah, Little Rabbit!" he said, through his teeth.

The young buck stood, and listened to the sound of battle.

Jacques took a step forward, and his foot pressed a twig, which broke.

Little Rabbit turned and darted a swift look in his direction.

"Who is it?" asked the little Indian. "The whites are shooting down the Indians from the strong fort, and Little Rabbit is going to hurry up the Senecas."

"Who sends you?"

"Black Heron."

"Where is the chief of the Mohawks?"

"Yonder. Over there, on the hill."

"Good!" said Jacques. "But come here, Little Rabbit."

The youth stepped toward him, but stopped as if he had suddenly become suspicious.

The Frenchman held out his hand.

"Who are you?" asked the Indian.

"War Fox, the Huron."

Little Rabbit fell back a pace, and laughed.

"There is no War Fox of the Hurons," he said. "Brother must have a forked tongue."

Then he leaned forward and took as good a look as he could at Jacques.

"Ah!" he cried. "The eyes of Little Rabbit do not deceive him, and his ears are true."

Jacques, seeing that he was discovered, bounded straight at the youth and caught his arm.

"Never mind about War Fox now," he exclaimed. "I am Dark Hand, the servant of the king, and your time has come."

Little Rabbit saw the murderous light that filled the Frenchman's eyes, and knew that, unless he broke away, his doom was sealed.

With the quickness of a cat, Little Rabbit turned suddenly and struck Dark Hand across the eyes.

Jacques broke into an oath and fell backward, and the Indian, taking advantage of his stroke, delivered another and another blow till he was enabled to free himself. Then, instead of running away, he drew a knife with a wild whoop and fell upon the Frenchman.

Jacques, but half prepared for the sudden onset, went to the ground, and Little Rabbit fell upon him.

Then began a wild fight for life.

The Frenchman should have been the Indian's superior in strength, but Little Rabbit, being younger, outmatched him in agility. The two squirmed on the ground, rolling over and over.

At last Little Rabbit found his fingers at the Frenchman's throat.

In vain did Jacques try to unslip them; in vain did he try to find Little Rabbit's ribs with his knife.

Deeper and deeper sank the nimble fingers into Jacques' throat; they found a lodgment behind his windpipe, and pressed together till he gasped for breath.

Then the knife of the young Indian glistened. Then a convulsive shiver told that it had been driven home.

No second stroke was needed. The buck leaped to his feet with the scalp cry of his race.

Something long and dark dangled from his crimson hand, and he turned back toward the fort and joined Black Heron just as that great war chief uttered a cry and fell dead, the bullet of a provincial having pierced his brain.

Half an hour later, a voice in the fort cried:

"What's up out thar?"

It was the voice of Straight-tongue, and he looked over the top of the stockade into the savage-infested forest.

The yells of the Indians had died away and a strange silence had fallen over the scene.

"It means more rascality," said Captain Lee, as he reached the old scout's side.

"I don't know," replied Straight-tongue. "I thought I saw an Indian. I fired. But they have ceased fighting——"

"It will come again by daylight."

But it did not come.

The forest grew still and those in the fort wondered. Something strange must have taken place, for the Indians no longer discharged their rifles at the stockades.

Daylight broke over the scene, and the defenders of the fort looked eagerly through the loopholes. Not an Indian was in sight.

From one of the gates, Jumping Bear, dressed as a Mohawk, slipped from the fort, and vanished.

By and by Jumping Bear was seen running back.

The gate was eagerly opened for him, and he sprang through.

A breathless crowd surrounded him. Lee spoke first.

"What has happened out there?" he cried.

"Black Heron is dead, Jacques Blanc has gone to the spirit land, and the Indians have retreated."

A wild shout of joy followed these words.

Those within the fort took hope.

Captain Lee ordered out a scouting party, and headed it himself. They slipped from the fort toward evening, and glided off into the forest.

"We must find out about this retreat," he said. "It may be but a ruse, after all."

Suddenly Jumping Bear stopped and pointed off into the woods.

Then he bounded in that direction and halted at a certain place.

The little detachment of young guardsmen ran to him and he pointed to an object lying half covered by a lot of winter leaves.

"Look!" cried Jumping Bear. "It is the body of Dark Hand."

As the death of Black Heron and Jacques had terminated the onset of the legions upon the settlements, the fort was soon afterward abandoned and the young guardsmen marched back over the border.

Their return to Winchester was hailed with delight by the citizens, and Captain Lee had the pleasure of receiving the thanks of Lord Fairfax.

Dick Parsons remained true to the English cause and was often seen in Winchester.

Jumping Bear, after a short sojourn with his white friends, returned to his tribe, promising to take up the hatchet again for the English as soon as the war was resumed.

Mistresses Randolph and Andrews—Amy and Bertha—with Joanna and her sister Karana, became greater favorites than before at both Winchester and Williamsburg.

In the campaign that followed, the young guardsmen bore an honorable part.

THE END.

### FISH FROM THE SKY.

Showers of fish have at times fallen in different parts of the world, causing much astonishment in those who have witnessed the strange occurrence, and not a little incredulity in those who have it only on hearsay. The fact, however, is now beyond doubt.

Some years since a considerable shower of small sticklebacks fell at Merthyr Tydvil, in Wales. The fish were strewed over an extent of several miles, many of them being alive when first seen, although they must have been conveyed a distance of thirty miles through the air from the ponds of brackish water near the sea, where those small fish are found.

Another event of the same kind took place in the island of Mull, Scotland, where herrings were found strewed on a hill at least five hundred yards from the sea.

This strange downfall takes place more frequently in tropical countries where violent whirlwinds occur; and the fish that fall are always of kinds which abound in the sea or fresh water of the neighborhood.

The explanation of this apparent mystery seems to be that the fish are caught up into the air by whirlwinds, and thus conveyed, often for many miles, from the place where they were first sucked up from the sea.

In tropical countries fish sometimes appear anew in ponds which have been for months dried up by the heat of the sun. When this occurs, it has been supposed that such fish have fallen from the clouds, but in reality they have only been buried in the mud below, some fish being capable of existing in a semi-torpid condition during the great heat of tropical regions, just as many of our small animals exist during the rigor of a northern winter.

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